

leatherhard

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Category:	Gen
Fandom:	The Owl House (Cartoon)
Relationships:	Darius & Hunter The Golden Guard (The Owl House) , Hunter The Golden Guard & Willow Park , Willow Park & Willow Park's Fathers , Hunter The Golden Guard & Luz Noceda , Darius/Previous Golden Guard
Characters:	Hunter The Golden Guard (The Owl House) , Darius (The Owl House) , Luz Noceda , Willow Park , Gus Porter , Eda Clawthorne , Emerald Entriails (The Owl House) , Emperor Belos (The Owl House) , Terra Snapdragon , Bad Girl Coven - Character , Tinella Nosa Tiny Nose (The Owl House)
Additional Tags:	Implied/Referenced Child Abuse , Angst with a Happy Ending , Angst and Hurt/Comfort , Angst and Fluff , Trans Hunter The Golden Guard (The Owl House) , Running Away , Self-Esteem Issues , Home Difficulties , Good Parent Darius (The Owl House) , Bad Parent Emperor Belos (The Owl House) , Good Friend Willow Park , Good Parent Eda Clawthorne , PLEASE read part 1 of this series first or you WILL be lost, or don't. maybe getting lost is your jam. , Other Additional Tags to Be Added , Transgender Author , hunter and willow could be platonic or romantic in this fic , I Report You Decide , like the populist scum i am appealing to everyone , abuse mindset , Returning to that again, this time its WORSE! , Hexside Student Hunter The Golden Guard , Human Ambassador Gus Porter , me when tiny nose &lt;3 , Darius has a Peacock Palisman , The Collector Possessing Luz Noceda (The Owl House) , except its not that bad its just flavor (at least in chapter one) , Post-Series , The good ending, imagine everything in the series finale goes right and then realize everyone has PTSD , ESPECIALLY Hunter , part of a series , Psychological Trauma , Suicidal Thoughts , Childhood Trauma , Good Parent Camila Noceda
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by [unexpectedchair](#)

Summary

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"And I'm not obligated to," Hunter crossed his arms.

"No. You're not. Except for one thing-" Willow placed her hands on his shoulder. "If Darius isn't being a good guardian to you, I need to know. You're my friend. One of my best. I can't let you get hurt."

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Leatherhard: A term used to refer to pottery that is just dry enough to not be easily bent out of shape, but damp enough to still have minor adjustments made to it.

Or, Hunter and Darius learn to live in a post-Belos world, one step at a time.

Notes

welcome to part two of this series! I said I wasn't sure if there would be a sequel! i was lying!!! ive had the ideas for this part of the series bouncing around in my brain since chapter 2 of OTM lol!!!!!!!!!!

also god the word count AGAIN. i really was like. tell a full story in less than 10k words challenge (IMPOSSIBLE)

have fun, heed the warnings at each chapter, and get ready for some classic Milas Style Bullshit!!!!!!!!!!!!!! oh yeah hi guys my name is milas :) nice to meet you!!!

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

looking for cracks

Chapter Summary

Hunter and Darius have a fight. They both struggle with the why.

Chapter Notes

WELCOME TO HELL!

This is a sequel to On The Mantle, please read that fic first or you'll probably be extremely lost!

I was super bored at work again. In less than 12 hours, I will be super bored at work. AGAIN.

Hopefully that means chapter two is soon

have fun with chapter one bestieeeeeeeeees

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Willow jerked awake at the sound of something tapping.

Next to her, Clover buzzed softly, before returning to sleep. Willow sat up, fumbling for her glasses, other hand hovering over palismen just in case it was an enemy. *Always be prepared*, as her fathers would tell her. She looked around her room, and upon not spotting anything inside, got up to check the doors. First, she opened the door to the hall, and found no one there, just the distant sound of Harvey snoring. Then, she went to the balcony window.

Floating on his staff, just above her balcony, was Hunter, bathed in moonlight. Willow blinked, then quietly opened the doors.

“Hunter...?” She was hesitant. Hunter had this look on his face- a tired, weary look he got sometimes when things were bad. Ever since the Emperor had been deposed and the Boiling Isles liberated, she’d seen that expression less and less. But now....

Something was off with her star player, and whatever it was, she was going to find out.

“... Can I stay here tonight?” Hunter asked quietly.

“Darius,” Hunter had asked, holding up the red-leather book to the page it had been left open on, “What the hell is this?”

Darius sighed deeply, hunched over his mug of tea. He could still see the look on Hunter’s face- of betrayal, of fear- as he vanished in a flash of gold light. At this point, Darius knew better than to give chase immediately. There was no Emperor’s coven to worry about anymore, and Hunter would *probably* go to the Owl House. If he chased right away, he’d do nothing but make Hunter *more* furious.

He thought they were doing okay. He had almost forgotten Lucius’s notebook and what he was keeping secret by not letting Hunter leave it. He had entirely forgotten he had left it *open on the counter*.

It really wasn’t important anymore, after all. Since Belos’s plans failed spectacularly, he never even really got the chance to use Hunter as a conduit for all that power. He had tried to make the spell work without Hunter, and... well. Now they had no Emperor, as Belos was slowly dying in a cell beneath the Palace (currently being repurposed into an Embassy). And they had a working portal between realms that *nobody* had to die for. And, finally, as a bonus deal from the universe, the newly formed Democratic Cabinet of the Boiling Isles had managed to establish diplomatic contact with the Human Realm. (Tinella Nosa was a surprisingly good speaker in favor of the Isles. With Gus’s help, of course.)

But even if it ended up not mattering to the world at large... clearly, it had mattered to Hunter. Darius couldn’t really blame him that much. Learning you were created as a replacement from your abuser was one thing, but finding out you weren’t even that, you were just a *tool*, from the notebook of a dead man?

Darius collapsed into his chair. He felt a great weight overtake his soul. Taking care of Hunter had really changed him deeply. Or maybe it had just brought back parts of him he had tried to bury along with Lucius. He felt like... a Darius in his early 20s, with a bunch of friends, a husband who loved him, a palisman on his shoulder and absolutely zero care for what other people thought of him.

Darius watched out the windows as the moon rose over the isles, the Collector trapped once more.

With Hunter around he found himself caring less and less about trivial things, like his appearance or the way he carried himself. He wasn’t Darius, the Abomination Coven Head, loyal to the emperor. He wasn’t even Darius, the Secret Rebel avenging his Husband’s untimely murder alongside his only remaining two friends. He was just... Darius Vainglory. He cared for Hunter and checked out the list of school supplies for Hexside and only looked at Penstagram to message Eberwolf.

But taking care of a kid, even if the kid wasn’t technically his, wasn’t always easy.

It was clear Hunter, despite being freed of the burdens that having the Emperor around brought, hadn’t even come close to recovering from what had happened. He had night terrors and flashbacks frequently, and would pull away from everyone for days at a time. He always bounced back, but... it didn’t change the fact that he wasn’t fully open.

It had taken him three months to come out to Darius as trans, for one, and the entire time he couldn't look Darius in the eyes. Which, of course, Darius told him that he didn't owe *anyone* that information, including him. But Hunter... he couldn't seem to process that it was okay to just be Hunter. No pretext or justification needed. He had stared at the floor, fists clenched, nails carving white half-moons into his palms. It broke Darius's heart. But with a story about how Lucius DIY-ed his own transition ("I had walked in on him trying to *give himself top surgery*. All I said was if he was going to be stupid, he better be tough."), Hunter was at the table and laughing with him in no time.

(Sometimes parenting Hunter was difficult, yes. But other times, it came as naturally as speaking.)

It was easy to get Hunter to open up about some things. Darius told him stories about the past Golden Guards, and casually left books on Wild Magic on Hunter's bedside. On his worst days, Darius would pry slightly, and Hunter would talk for hours about magic theory until neither of them remembered why Hunter was upset.

Darius groaned loudly. That was probably part of why him keeping this from Hunter was such a big deal to him, he guessed. Hunter had identity issues and a very obvious special interest in Wild Magic. Darius had managed to mess with both of those in one fell swoop.

"Maybe this is a bad idea, Azul," he patted his palisman gently.

Azul let out a long caw, which roughly translated to, *Don't be a coward. You're a grown ass man. Talk to him about it.*

"Yeah, really helpful. Don't you think if I knew how to do that, he'd still be here?"

Not about this, Azul pecked at Darius's hand, *About the other thing.*

Darius blinked. Slowly, he took Azul off his lap, and set him on the table. He looked his palisman dead in her beady little eyes.

"Azul," he said slowly, "He just ran sprinting into the night because I hid the truth about his existence from him, and you're suggesting now is the time to bring up *adopting him*?"

Azul cheeped in affirmation. Darius gently placed a tissue over her head, muffling her indignant caws.

"I need advice from someone who's done this before," Darius muttered. "Like..."

He sat up straight, reaching for the phone.

"Like my favorite cousin-in-law?" He suggested to Azul, who was still fighting for her life against the tissue.

“It is eleven at night,” Edalyn began, sounding extremely exhausted, “I just came back from dinner with the Noceda’s. Raine is literally asleep and snoring next to me. If someone isn’t dead, I’m gonna bite your stupid face off.”

“Dead, no,” Darius said, pacing around his room, “But ran away? Yes.”

He heard the other side of the line go silent for a second. “What happened to Hunter?”

Darius sighed deeply. “Remember Lucy’s notebook? With the notes on Grimwalkers? He decided to read it, and learned of his *true* purpose. He has since vanished.”

Eda swore lowly. “Alright, alright, fine, I’m up. You want me to look for him, or do you want advice- King! Ack! Hey-”

“Hello there, Goo Boy!” King called from the other side of the phone. “I, the Grand Titan of this Island, have graced you with my voice!”

Darius rolled his eyes. “Hello, King. Unless you know where Hunter has gone to, please hand me back to Edalyn.”

“Oh, but I do know!” King exclaimed. “He’s with Willow and her Dads! Luz got a text from her earlier about it. I just wanted to point and laugh at you, because it sounds like you messed up real bad. And I love two things in this world: hot goss, and making people feel bad for their mistakes!”

Darius spluttered. “You-”

“Okay, bye, back to Eda! Hehehehe!” Darius heard the sound of people wrestling for the phone.

“Hi, Darius,” Eda said, sounding even more tired than she had when she picked up. “King has a vendetta against you because you wouldn’t make him extra pancakes last week. Sorry for my nine-year-old.”

“Ah,” Darius slid a hand down his face. “I knew I would regret that decision. But he was a bit helpful- the Park family. Hunter is there.” Darius sighed deeply. “At least I know he’s safe.”

“Mm,” Eda sighed. “That’s true. But I imagine his friends aren’t happy with you.”

“I don’t care about his friends and what they think of me. I care if Hunter’s alright.”

“I care,” Eda began, “That you have been doing really well at handling Hunter’s *Hunter-ness* lately, and all of a sudden you’re calling *me* for advice. What *really* happened tonight?”

Darius fell silent, a tightness in his chest.

“You,” Hunter’s voice shook, “You- you kept this from me? Even though you knew I- I wanted to know?”

“Hunter,” Darius had tried. “It wasn’t the right- I didn’t want you to-”

“No! No, no! You-” Hunter searched for the words, grabbing at the air. “You- you! You thought you were protecting me, weren’t you! Well, you weren’t! You-”

Darius watched as Hunter faltered, like he thought twice about what he was about to say, before he decided to commit to it.

“You’re acting just like Belos did!”

Hunter stood there, breathing hard with the weight of the words he had just expelled. Darius was frozen. The words- they cut deep. How true were they? Did Hunter mean that?

Hunter took in a deep breath, tears welling in his eyes. Then, he ran out the door, down the hill, to the base of Darius’s estate. Darius reached out a hand- but Hunter simply looked back, and vanished in a comet of gold light.

“... Wow,” is all Eda said, when Darius finished.

“Mm. And I know- I know on some level, that he probably didn’t mean it. I know-” Darius took a deep breath. “But that didn’t make it easier to hear. It still doesn’t. I feel like- he’s made me a better person. I was vapid and obsessed with revenge, and then-”

“And then the kid comes along,” Eda finished, “And suddenly you want more than anything to be good. You care so much. I know how it goes. But Luz... Luz isn’t *easy*, but she’s very different from Hunter. And she had and has a parent who loves her before she fell into my household. Hunter has no frame of reference for healthy. And I don’t really think you do either.”

“My father was an excellent man,” Darius defended.

“Oh, I know he was. That’s not what I’m talking about. I’m talking about *you*. Like you said, before you were vapid and selfish. Before Luz, I at least had raised King. But you? Have you ever mentored another person like that? Or was it just you and Lucy... and then just *you*?”

Darius closed his eyes. He let himself be quiet for a moment.

“I don’t really know who Darius Vainglory is anymore. And I especially don’t know whether that’s a *good* thing anymore, either.”

“I don’t know who Edalyn Clawthorne is myself. The best we can do is try and find out. And hope ‘parent’ fits in there somewhere, in our puzzle. Now, tell me. What’s your plan of attack?”

“I don’t really know,” Darius sighed, “But I don’t want to be Darius Vainglory, the Coven Head, the one who treated Hunter like an inconvenience. I want to be... Darius Vainglory, the man who fixes this.”

“Then for a step one,” Eda suggested, “Try giving him a call sometime tomorrow.”

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“Of course you can stay here,” Gilbert said gently, resting a hand on Hunter’s shoulder. “Any friend of Willow’s is welcome here.”

Hunter looked down. “I don’t mean to impose.”

“Nonsense!” Harvey exclaimed. “It’s not often Willow brings her friends over. Or that they show up at her window!”

Gilbert made a face, like he knew the second was actually *very* often. Willow mirrored the expression.

“Dad, please don’t embarrass Hunter,” Willow crossed her arms, sliding a mug of Lavender tea to Hunter. “This isn’t a fun visit, anyways.”

“Right, right,” Harvey waved, “Would you like to tell us what happened?”

Hunter squirmed under the expectant stares of the Park family. “Uhm.”

“Don’t make him talk if he doesn’t want to, dear,” Gilbert elbowed his husband.

“Oh, yes. You don’t have to tell us anything if you don’t want-”

“No!” Hunter exclaimed. “No, I will. It’s not.. Complicated. Uhm. I had a fight with my...” Hunter struggled for the right word. Mentor? Didn’t quite capture what Darius was to him. Caretaker? Hunter was a handful, he knew, but he mostly could care for himself. Roommate? Far too impersonal.

(Father figure. He knew the term was father figure. But saying that out loud would just make it all feel worse.)

“Guardian,” he settled on. “I had a fight. He hid something important from me, and I just... ran out.”

Harvey and Gilbert looked at him sadly. Willow patted his arm. The pity- it just made Hunter feel angry and cold all over again.

“Regardless,” he snapped tightly, “Thank you for your hospitality, but I just need a place to sleep. If you could show me where, I’ll rest, and then be out of your hair by daybreak.”

Willow’s fathers looked at each other, and then him. Hunter could feel Willow staring at him- her eyes hadn’t left his face all night.

“Well,” Harvey began, “Speaking as a father myself, I’m sure your Guardian is worried about you. Fights like this happen sometimes within a household. But I’m sure it’ll be okay. *If only I was so sure*, Hunter thought. Instead of replying, he turned and followed Willow up the stairs.

"Which part of the floor will I be sleeping on?" Hunter asked when they got to her room.

Willow squinted at him. "You're taking the bed."

"Wh- Then where are *you* going to sleep?!"

Willow shrugged. "I'll figure it out when I'm actually tired. Listen, Hunter," She stalked over, jabbing her finger in his chest. "You still haven't actually let anything spill."

"And I'm not obligated to," Hunter crossed his arms.

"No. You're not. Except for one thing-" Willow placed her hands on his shoulder. "If Darius isn't being a good guardian to you, I need to know. You're my friend. One of my best. I can't let you get hurt."

Hunter froze. He looked down at his feet, then back up at her. How to begin to explain the depths of how fucked up he was?

"... He is good to me. That's the problem," he settled on.

Willow blinked, looking at him strangely, before she had a realization and sat on the bed.

"Talk to me about it," Willow patted the spot next to her.

Hunter scooted over next to her on the bed.

"...There's this part of me," he began after a minute of mulling it over, "That still misses Belos. That misses- the routine of it all. I'd be sent on a mission. I'd fail. He'd be disappointed or worse. With Darius, every day is different. And it's good sometimes, that it's all new and exciting. Other times... I just want my old life back. The life where I knew what to expect."

Willow nodded slowly. "There's comfort in normalcy. Even if that normalcy is bad. Sometimes I feel that way... Remember how I used to get bullied?"

Hunter nodded, relieved that it wasn't just him. "Yeah."

"Obviously, I think what you went through was a bit more intense, but, I do get it. Wanting back the routine of being downtrodden. Missing the sadness. But, I don't know. I think I like the unpredictability of being happy more." She smiled at him.

"Most days, I do too," Hunter sighed. "But- I don't know. When I was reading through the journal, all I could think was... *finally*. Proof I was right."

"Right?"

Hunter nodded. "I know-... Logically, I'm safe now. But there's this... fear. I can't shake it. I feel like I'm constantly looking for a *reason*." His fists clenched. "A reason to- believe what Belos said. That I'd never be free. That I was always going to be just... the Golden Guard."

Willow placed her hand on his shoulder. Hunter breathed in deeply.

He felt a deep, unbearable pain settle in his chest. It was strange. Externalizing these thoughts, and being listened to.

He didn't want to burden Willow. But now that he had started talking, it's like he couldn't stop.

"More than that," he continued. "I want a reason to believe the *other* things people have said. That- I'm a bad person. That you and everyone else have made a bad call, trusting me. That the only worth I really have is when I'm being useful. Maybe that's part of why- I wasn't even *really* mad at Darius. I get why he hid it from me! It *is* messing with my head, and he probably was doing me a favor keeping the truth from me. I think I just wanted a reason to self-destruct."

"Hunter," Willow murmured sadly.

"But the worst part by far," Hunter let out a hysterical laugh, "Is that- I really didn't even *mean* it. It just- In the moment, I wanted to be cruel," he rested his chin on his knees. "Because. I *wanted* him to react. I wanted him- to, I don't know. Prove me right. I wanted him to act like Belos. I wanted him to hurt me, to- give me a new scar, to thunder and march around and... and... kick me out, throw me to the curb. I wanted him to prove to me that I'm right to be so scared all the time. That I'm right to still check the corners of my room before I sleep. I wanted him to be so upset with me, that things would go back to *normal*. But the problem is I *was* wrong. Darius is nothing like Belos." Hunter's voice took on the tone of someone about to cry. He hid his face. "And I just ruined my relationship with the one adult who ever- who ever cared about me without expecting anything. Because I wanted him to hurt me. Isn't that just *deranged* of me?"

Willow was giving him a strange, indecipherable look. Hunter looked away, shame filling his thin frame.

"Alright," Willow slung an arm around his shoulders, "Step into my office, friend."

"What- *ack!*" Hunter was suddenly full force yanked onto his back by Willow.

They lay on Willow's bed together, Hunter pressed into her side, her arm still around him. Together, they looked up at the ceiling, where Willow's childhood paintings displayed a crude scene of a rainbow and a forest.

"I think," Willow murmured, "What might be helpful for you. Is if you draw a list of similarities between Belos and Darius, and then try and outline where they differ. I do it when I think of Amity then, and Amity *now*."

Hunter swallowed. "How... how do I-"

"I'll give an example. Amity back then and Amity now can be... really rude to other people. But where Amity back then was cruel *towards* me, Amity now does it to *defend* me. Cause I'm her friend."

Hunter processed this, then nodded slowly.

"Belos and Darius both kept things from me," Hunter said, "But... while Belos did it to hurt me and use me, Darius was trying to keep me safe."

"That's an important one," Willow nodded. "Go on. Another."

"He and Belos both took me in when I had no one else," Hunter settled on, "But where Belos was just pretending to care, Darius actually does."

"I forgot Belos technically 'adopted' you. Convoluting, considering."

Hunter let out a small laugh, curling closer to Willow. "Um. Both Darius and Belos... Both Darius and Belos have gotten mad at me before. Really mad. But Belos- he'd hurt me, where Darius. Darius wouldn't. He promised he wouldn't..."

"And has he?" Willow coaxed.

"No. Never." Hunter shook his head. "He's- he's only been kind. I- I need to go back--"

"Hunter," Willow wrapped her arms around him, "In the morning, dude. It's like, one in the morning. Don't make important life decisions after 9 P.M."

Hunter slowly nodded, letting himself relax. "... I can't sleep. Not- not now."

"Okay, then," Willow rolled over, grabbing her scroll off the nightstand. "Me neither, honestly. Wanna watch dumb videos until we both pass out from exhaustion?"

He smiled. "That sounds doable." Then, after a second. "... Please don't tell anyone what I said. I'm sorry for- burdening you with all that."

Willow poked his nose. "You know I don't think you're a burden, and you know I won't tell anyone. It's just us listening in this room. Oh, and our palismen, but I don't think they'll snitch!"

Hunter sighed softly. "Just us."

Beneath Willow's open window, Terra Snapdragon grinned to herself.

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Darius calls Hunter

Darius stared at the call-bird in his hand. The raven stared back, the speaker in its stomach playing a dial tone as one of its brethren called Hunter.

"I hate phone calls," he mumbled to Azul, who was trying to preen his 'feathers' by pecking at his hair. Nothing was really happening on that front, considering there was just abomination goop there.

"Hello?"

Darius jumped. "Hello, Hunter," he said, after gaining his bearings. "I. Uh."

It was at this moment Darius realized he didn't really think about what he was gonna say.

"Darius," Hunter sounded both apprehensive and relieved to hear from him. "I, um. I'm at the Parks house."

"I'm aware," Darius acknowledged, "King informed me of such."

There was a long, awkward pause.

"I want to say-

"I have to tell you-

Both paused, then laughed.

"You first," Darius urged gently.

"Um," Hunter's voice was kind of far away, like his head was turned away from the phone. "I. I think I'll be home later today. If that's okay with you."

"Of course it's okay," Darius replied, relieved, "I'll be here. We can talk about it then. But I want to say sor-

"I'm sorry," Hunter blurted. ".. Um. Both for interrupting you and running off."

Darius felt a surge of affection. "I was going to say sorry, too. For... hiding everything from you. I'm happy to explain my reasons when you're home. And... you're forgiven, first of all. I understand how it is- just maybe tell me where you're going, next time? We can talk more when you're here, but for now..."

Hunter was quiet for a second. "You want me home?" Darius felt his heart break a little. "Of course. Arguments may happen, but that doesn't mean I'm going to kick you out just like *that*."

Another pause. "... Okay, I- Okay. I'll be home tonight."

Hunter hung up.

"See you then, Little Prince," Darius mumbled. "See you then."

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Hunter comes home and they talk

"Call if you need anything else," Willow said, giving him a quick hug from her staff. Then, she took off, down the arm, back towards Bonesborough. Her home.

Hunter stared up at the mouth of *his*.

Darius' house lay steadily against the silence of the evening. A few fireflies buzzed in the early summer air, but luckily none buzzed over and tried to light Hunter aflame. Hunter was frozen, looking up at the place he had run from less than twenty-four hours ago.

Darius was there. Waiting for him. Waiting to talk about all of this. Answers were inside- as was... everything else.

Hunter felt like a deer in the human realm, caught in the headlights of an oncoming girl. There was no getting away now- the light was in his eyes. He couldn't bolt again.

"He won't hurt me," He said to himself, more of a hope than something he really believed. He knew on some level Darius wouldn't, probably. But there was no shaking that ever-present shadow of his uncle. At least not yet. He still felt terrified, like he wasn't staring down his house, but instead that open maw of a grand doorway. Belos behind it.

Hunter was shaken out of his freeze response by the sound of the front door opening. He watched, as Darius stepped out...

... And his expression immediately softened with relief at the sight of Hunter.

Hunter didn't know what overcame him. Maybe it was that very few people had ever really been relieved to see him. Annoyed, most often. Angry for a close second. And very rarely, on the worst nights at the palace, a curious sort of hunger from Belos. Maybe it was that he really did miss his house, his bed, his caretaker who actually cared for him. The three birds on the mantle. All together.

Maybe, maybe, maybe. Either way, Hunter broke into a sprint up the hill, and slammed into Darius's open embrace. *All together.*

"I'm sorry," he whispered, voice cracking as he buried his face into Darius's shoulder. "I- I- I didn't mean any of it. *I didn't*. Y-... you're not like him, *I didn't mean it!*"

"I know," Darius murmured back, "I know you didn't. And I didn't mean to keep all that from you. I'm sorry, too."

They stood there for a moment. For that moment, Hunter almost believed that maybe, just as Hunter had begun to see Darius as a father, Darius had begun to see him as a son. Maybe, just maybe, it had been that way for a long time.

"This damn book," Darius slid the offending object towards Hunter, "Is what it looks like. It's a lot of Lucius's notes from when... Well, when Belos was looking to make a new nephew. There's a lot about my late husband I still don't know even now, and none of us probably ever will. Very rarely are the dead talkative. So, when I read this through... I told myself I'd tell you eventually. Eventually, eventually, eventually... and then you read it first."

“Why keep it from me after the Day of Unity?” Hunter asked. “It didn’t matter after that.”

“Not on a logical level,” Darius sighed, resting his head on his chin. “But logic has long flown out the window with this whole thing. I’m not entirely sure. Perhaps I wanted to keep this one last piece of Lucy. Perhaps I was worried you’d take it... *very* poorly. All things considered, you’ve handled this surprisingly well. But I am sorry regardless”

Hunter nodded. “I don’t think that’s. Entirely wrong. I wish... you had told me, obviously,” Hunter gesticulated. “But I don’t know. I can’t say how I would’ve reacted if you sat down and talked to me about it.” He sighed deeply. “Is it bad that, at this point in it all, finding out I’m a living energy booster is sort of a ‘well, this might as well happen’ thing?”

Darius laughed softly. “I’m about there, as well. It’s been a very interesting year for everyone. Now. Do you want to talk about why you ran?”

Hunter felt a lump in his throat. He didn’t want to explain... all of it. Talking about it to Willow was, in his mind, a mistake. No one should know how badly he was damaged by Belos- that’s a weakness that could be exploited.

But he felt he owed Darius a little bit of it.

“I don’t know,” Hunter shrugged, “I think part of me felt like... I was there in the Owl House, finding out I was a grimwalker again. I don’t like it when things about me are kept from me. I’ve had enough of that for one lifetime.”

“That’s fair enough,” Darius said.

“And,” Hunter continued, with a sudden rush of bravery, “Part of me- still feels like one day you’re going to snap and prove you are like Belos. It’s irrational. But- I guess it just felt like proof. I’m sorry...”

“You are forgiven, you know,” Darius replied gently. “I don’t blame you for acting like a traumatized person would.”

“Traumatized,” Hunter scoffed. “Things just can’t be easy for me.”

“They’ll get easier.”

Hunter sighed, looking at his mug of tea. “I forgive you, too. It’s- it was all stupid. All of it. I can’t really fault stupid. Stupid goes where stupid will.” “Wise words,” Darius raised his own mug in a mock toast, “I’m glad we talked. I’m... new to this. Having a child in my home. But we’re figuring it out. I’d like to continue figuring it out.” Darius looked like he was going to say something, but decided against it. “Is.. that all that’s bothering you?”

Hunter was suddenly faced with a choice. He could tell Darius about the other part of this. That that sick twisted part of him missed Belos’s abuse. Missed the normalcy of it all. Wanted the routine. Or, he could keep it a secret, and let it fester.

(He had already caused Darius enough problems. Hunter could deal with this alone.)

“No,” He lied with ease, “That’s really the gist of it.”

“...Alright,” Darius said after a moment. “In that case, get some rest. In the morning, we’ll discuss Hexside supplies. The semester starts in less than a month.”

Hunter smiled. It was only a little fake.

--

“Your hair has gotten really long, really fast,” Amity commented, pulling Hunter’s hair into a series of braids. “I’ve been trying to grow mine out for years. Yours has gotten twice as long as mine in less than two months. What sorcery is this?”

“According to the notebook on my very existence,” Hunter crossed his arms from where he sat on the floor of Willow’s bedroom, “It’s because my hair is made of Palistrom husk. The keratin grows completely wild as a result. It is *extremely* annoying. I’m sick of waking up with hair in my face.”

Luz snorted from where Willow was doing her nails- half yellow, half blue. “Why not cut it, then?”

“Because, you said, and I quote,” Hunter put his hands up in quotation marks, “‘I bet you your hair won’t look as good as Bump’s when long.’ That was a challenge. I intend to rise to it and prove you wrong. I will have absolutely *beautiful* hair.”

“If you could brush it properly,” Gus muttered from where he was watching Amity work, “It took Amity like an hour to get out all the knots.”

Hunter flushed with embarrassment. “There weren’t many hairbrushes in the castle. I kind of forgot they existed.”

“Wait, you didn’t brush your hair for years?” Luz laughed. “That explains so much about you as a person.”

“You have to share a body with an ancient evil spirit,” Hunter crossed his arms. “Humble yourself.”

“Hey,” Luz whined, jabbing a finger at him and getting blue nail polish all over Willow’s shoulder. “The Collector has been sleeping for like, three weeks now. Not a peep! I’ve *mastered* my superpowered evil side.”

It was the first sleepover they had been able to do since Belos’s defeat. Things were... very different for a lot of his friend group. Everyone was busy with *something*.

Gus and Tinella Nosa (Hunter liked the nickname ‘Tiny Nose’ a lot more) had been being ambassadors to the Human Realm’s governments. Any worries of war had been easily soothed by their quick talking and shows of good faith, but there was still a lot of work to do.

Amity was using her time to master Abomination magic, and with the Coven system gone, started learning more about other magic, too. She had also been away a lot with her father-

while her relationship with her mother was basically burnt toast, Alador had been putting in the effort. Especially now that the apocalypse wasn't looming over their heads.

Willow, when she wasn't texting Hunter pictures of Clover or trying to get him to try new things, was going absolutely ham on Flyer Derby. She was the only person who Hunter was busy *with*, but trying to get a sports team to get off the ground outside of a school setting was a lot of work. Willow was to be a professional- and introduce the sport to the other side of the portal.

And Luz. Luz had had the most rough go of it on the day of Unity. Her sacrifice made all of this possible- she had accepted the Collector into her mind, sharing a body with an ancient evil. But doing so turned the tides, and allowed victory over Belos- Luz was Luz. She found a way. Even at a cost to herself.

She managed to pacify the *thing* sharing her body enough to have a majority of the control. Apparently, keeping the Collector calm became relatively easy once Luz realized that having the mind of a child meant she could keep him at bay *like* a child- by playing with him and giving him attention.

"He sleeps most of the time, now," Luz had said, dual-toned sclera the only indication the Collector was there at all. *"When he's awake, it's- scary. But It's manageable. I have you guys. And a new aesthetic. Sun and moon imagery- a classic!"*

Now, she was mostly busy with controlling that small amount of time the Collector tried to wake up, and visiting her mom. She had a lot to catch up with Camilla. But... the peaceful uniting of the realms had made Camilla a lot more open to the idea of Luz going back and forth. Eventually. It had taken a couple weeks and a visit from Eda.

It was nice that things had... mostly worked out for everyone. Hunter supposed he was busy, too- traumatic stress took a lot of energy to recover from. He still felt pretty useless, but... well. Those feelings were being recovered from, too.

A sleepover was a good time to catch up and just.. relax. Everyone needed a break. And Hunter had missed his friends.

"Mastered it," Hunter retorted, "Like I've mastered having long hair."

Luz stuck her tongue out at him.

"I am now done," Amity threw her hands in the air as the last braid was tied.

"Congratulations, Hunter, you now have the hair of an elven prince."

"Well, I am now covered in nail polish." Willow wiped her arm. "It looks like I have the *armor* of an elven prince."

"Nice fashion statement," Gus nodded appreciatively, "A new way to use a human invention. A little splash of color."

"Hm, maybe don't get that on your bare skin." Luz winced.

“Why not? It’s fashionable!”

Hunter smiled to himself. “.. I missed you guys.”

“Gay,” Luz said instinctively, “Sorry. I’m used to poking fun at you. I missed you too.”

“Being busy sucks,” Gus complained, “I love the human realm, but sometimes I just wanna have a nap pile with my friends.”

“We could do that now,” Amity pointed out, “It’s like, two a.m at this point. That’s a good time for bed.”

Luz and Willow exchanged glances.

“The eldest shall be the base for our fort,” Willow declared, “Everyone tackle Hunter!”

“What? Ah!” Hunter exclaimed, before all his friends collapsed, suplexed, and otherwise fell on top of him.

Now laying on a pile on the floor, being crushed by the weight of his four best friends, Hunter groaned. “I changed my mind. Fuck you guys. I did not miss you at all, I lied.”

“You wuv us,” Luz grinned.

He did. But he wouldn’t say it.

“Hexside starts up again in a week,” Willow said after the room had gotten quiet, “And this time we’re all gonna be in the same school.”

“That’s right!” Gus exclaimed. “I had almost forgotten Darius is letting you go.”

“Are you ready for the entrance exam?” Amity asked.

“Oh, you have no idea,” Hunter grinned. “I’m ready for anything Hexside throws at me.”

--

On the opposite side of the isles, what was once a grand Palace was being slowly reclaimed and turned into something else. Where the walls were once left to grow freely like a tumor, the parts Belos had raised from the earth like a living organism now began to retreat into a neat pattern of controlled hospitality. The new Embassy, housing the portal, was the hub for all things Boiling Isles, like it had been before.

It housed more than just the portal- beneath the very sinew it had been torn from, deep within the catacombs of this great beast, a very very old human sat alone and chained to a wall. Barely breathing, shallow with the pain of being alive still.

This very very old human received a visitor, in the night, in the dark. And in that suffocating gore of darkness, she told him what she had heard.

Deep within his cell, Belos smirked.

Chapter End Notes

uh oh this one has plot that isnt just Hunter Sad.

be afraid, see you next chapter!

im taking more time with this fic because i'm trying not to overdo it, so be patient for th
next update. I prommy i will give it to you. i prommy. i dont break prommys

love you guys bye

bone dry

Chapter Summary

Hexside School of Magic & Demonics, and all it brings.

Chapter Notes

hi besties!!! today I cried at work because I was so stressed and tired since rn were super understaffed. but my boss let me go get pizza for an hour and I became Normal again. shoutout to my boss Ginger. I'd kill every single patron at my pool for her

on my downs I did write this. so there. i am too pwoerful and cannot be stopped, CAPITALISM

also took Boscha's last name from her VA, Eden Riegel. did you know eden is the sister of Sam Riegel, famed critical role player? owl house dnd real

PLEASE HEEEEED THE WARNINGS ON THIS ONE AS THIS CHAPTER IS WHEN SHIT STARTS GETTING REAL REAL. Warning for pretty severe Gaslighting and intentional triggering of the Abuse Mindset. Also minor warning for alcohol!

enjoy chapter 2!!! and thank a lifeguard today!!!!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

"I'm beginning to worry that maybe this is a bad idea," Hunter said.

Darius laughed. "You'll be fine. Hexside is a great place. Just try not to get thrown into the detention pit on your first day."

"Detention *pit*?" Hunter blinked. "Yeah. This is a bad idea."

Darius patted his shoulder. "You can't possibly get in that much trouble that quickly. I don't think even Edalyn managed that much."

"Luz did."

"Well, mixing magic is no longer banned," Darius pointed out, "So you and her shouldn't have that problem. Is it the entrance exam that's stressing you out?"

Hunter scoffed, giving both staffs- he had reclaimed the Golden Guard staff as his own not long ago- a dramatic twirl. "I'll do *incredible* on the entrance exam. I know *way* more than two spells, even without my own magic. It's all the other kids I'm worried about. I am... not good at socializing..."

Darius snorted. "Literally all of your friends go to Hexside. You'll be okay. You'll probably even have more friends than I did by the day is done."

"What, you weren't the most popular guy in school?"

Darius smiled fondly at the memories. "Surprisingly, No. I did not peak in high school, thank you very much. For a while, it was just me and my two closest friends... After our group fell apart, however, I had no one. Until Glandus paid a visit... and I found myself with lifelong friends. Lucius, for one. Eberwolf as well- and through them, I connected with Raine, Edalyn, and Lilith. I didn't need more than that. I think you'll find people who have *dozens* of friends while in school are actually quite lonely."

Hunter nodded, processing this. "Well. I'll try not to start any fights."

"If you *must*," Darius ruffled Hunter's hair, "You better win."

"As if that was even a question," Hunter smirked. "See you later!"

Darius watched as Hunter shot into the sky on his staff. He sighed, and wished a good first day to the open air.

--

"You're gonna do great," Luz said, making the motion of running up the stairs. "You're gonna do awesome! You're gonna kill this audition!"

The backstage of the auditorium was full of potential students. Most were around Gus or Luz's age, but a few were in Hunter's age range of fifteen to sixteen, he guessed. Most looked nervous. Hunter felt out of place in his confidence... and of course because Luz was yelling.

"I know that," Hunter crossed his arms, "You know that. Luz, I was *Golden Guard*. I'm gonna crush this audition and you know it. *You are more nervous than me.*"

"Sorry," she flapped her hands, "Sorry, I just! So excited! And nervous!"

"Go to the audience with everyone else," Hunter poked her forehead, "I'll see you after. You're psyching me out."

Luz nodded, gave him a quick hug, and then ran down the stairs to the seating of the auditorium.

"Next! Hunter, err, I see you don't have a last name. We'll go with Darius's, as he enrolled you," there was the sound of Bump flipping some pages as he called, "Hunter Vainglory-Clawthorne, you're up."

Hunter felt a weird tug in his chest. *Vainglory-Clawthorne*. Three birds on a mantle. It felt right, in some distant wanting of his. He took a moment to take a breath, and then stepped to the edge of the curtains.

'Give them a show,' Darius had advised, *'Presentation is everything'*.

Rascal, as rehearsed, flew from his sleeve, landing in the middle of the stage. Hunter felt the magic of both staffs tug in his soul as the familiar sensation of teleportation took hold, and he appeared in a flash of red and gold where Flapjack formerly stood.

Hunter took both staffs, one in each hand- Flapjack in his right, the Golden Staff in the other, and twirled them dramatically as he spun into an upright stance, before stopping his motion by slamming the heel of both staffs into the ground simultaneously. The sound echoed around the auditorium. Bump raised his eyebrows.

"As the Golden Guard," He began, letting his pride seep into his tone. "I was *tenacious*."

A flash of red, and then a flash of gold, as he teleported to both ends of the stage, creating the momentarily illusion of him facing himself. He saw as he did so, on the edges of the stage, that Amity and Willow had done as he asked.

"As a student at Hexside?" He flashed a grin. "Not much would change about that."

He spun his staffs around, pointing one to the left, the other to the right- two halves of the same whole. He pointed each at one of the basins of water that his friends had placed. He closed his eyes, focusing on two things at once, as he pulled the liquids from each basin and drew them into shapes across the stage.

Whales, koi fish, boiling snappingfish, turtles- the water took the shape of these creatures. Hunter smirked as he saw the shocked faces of his future classmates who had decided to skip first class to come watch. His creations, his shaped water, danced around the air.

Then, he twirled all the liquid together, ending his little show by turning all the liquid into a giant visage of a Selkiedomus. A callback to how this all began- why he was here. Luz grinned at him from the second row.

Then, he put the water back in the basins.

"This concludes my presentation," he bowed, only a bit smugly.

Bump applauded. "Quite a show!" He remarked, "Much more carefully executed than Miss Noceda's audition. Welcome to Hexside, Hunter."

He pointed to Luz, grinning with triumph. "I told you I'd nail it! You worried for nothing!"

She stuck her tongue out at him.

"Let me guess," Principal Bump said not unkindly, "You want to study a little bit of everything?"

Hunter nodded, embarrassed that it was that obvious he was a nerd. Bump twirled his finger- and Hunter's uniform changed to reflect every track. It was more of a gradient than with solid separations- reflecting the new world of Wild magic. Hunter smiled.

"I was surprised to see you enroll here," Bump commented, gathering Hunter's supplies for his classes. "Especially under Darius's name. I was under the impression, from my time working with the Emperor's Coven, that you two didn't like each other. That, and I'm interested to see what exactly you have to learn from us."

Hunter shrugged. "This may come as a surprise to you, but... I actually don't really know much about the nine main forms of magic. Most of the magic I do is evocation, and that doesn't belong to any one track. Besides, research alone can only take you so far."

"Well," Bump bowed his head politely, "I welcome you to learn as much as you can. Just... try not to cause the same trouble as your friends have. And maybe give Boscha some space. You've made quite a name as the 'star player' of the Flyer Derby team before even actually enrolling..."

"Boscha?" Hunter raised an eyebrow. "I have no idea who that is."

He very quickly found out who Boscha was. A few hours later, Hunter was sitting at lunch, getting the potion gunk out of his hair.

"Dude," Luz huffed. "It literally hasn't even been half a day yet and she's already on you?"

"Regimes rise and fall," Skara sighed, "But Boscha still remains a jerk. I can't believe I was friends with her for so long!"

"I can't, either," Willow muttered, turning around to glare at where Boscha and her remaining friends sat. "I really don't mind too much when she tries to mess with me. But when she messes with my friends? Hmph."

"It's not a big deal," Hunter said, voice flat despite how he was smiling, "I will simply destroy her entire life."

"Tenacious indeed," Gus whistled. "I think she's mad because your audition was so cool and hers was just smacking a Grudgby ball around."

"Grudgby is dumb," Hunter said, matter-of-factly. "Like, at least there's no magic 'you win!' flag in Flyer Derby. It makes sense. There's a point to it."

"Uh. Hunter?" Willow pointed to just behind Hunter's shoulder.

Hunter turned around and locked eyes with Boscha. He jumped- how had she moved that fast?

"Lord, do you always sneak up on people?" He recoiled. "I didn't even hear you coming!"

“Yeah, yeah, you’re unobservant,” Boscha flipped her hand around, “Whatever. Listen, dude. I know you probably think you’re all that because you used to be the Golden Guard-”

Hunter rolled his eyes. Well, *yeah*. Sue him. He still felt some smugness for holding such a respected title, despite what he now knew it meant. Such feelings of pride didn’t just turn to ash. He was one of the most powerful witches on the Boiling Isles when he wore that mask. In a way, he still was- He had even reclaimed the staff! Belos or no Belos, he *was* the Golden Guard.

“-But we all know what you're like. Considering you just up and abandoned it all for whatever.”

“Excuse me?” Luz raised an eyebrow at her. “‘Whatever’- do you mean stopping a *genocide*?”

“Not all of us believe that, Human,” One of Boscha’s cronies retorted, “Maybe you just wanted to make everyone’s lives harder.”

“It was real alright,” Hunter stood up, looming over Boscha, “And if I were you, I’d *back off*.”

“Oh, the Golden Traitor wants to fight!” Boscha let out a rude laugh. “Everyone knows without Belos, you’re *nothing*.”

Hunter recoiled. *Thanks, Boscha. I really needed to hear my deepest insecurity thrown back at me today.*

Willow leapt to her feet, slamming her fists on the lunch table. “Low blow, Boscha! Leave him alone, you subpar jock!”

“Ugh, whatever, half-a-witch,” Boscha flipped her hair. “When the little Golden Traitor decides you’re his next *target* and leaves you all behind for ‘greener pastures’, don’t come crying to me cause I was right. People with no sense of loyalty rarely change... regardless of who they associate with.” She gave everyone at the table a pointed look.

Hunter was *furious*.

He could take having trash thrown at him, or getting flicked, or getting his uniform ruined- he had had way worse at the Palace. But when they began to insinuate that he would ever betray his friends for any reason- when they compared his friends to his *abuser*-

Something snapped. He summoned Flapjack into a staff, levitated his lunch tray, and dumped it on her head. Probably more forcefully than was safe.

Boscha turned, shrieking in rage. The entire lunchroom was staring slack-jawed at them now. *Sorry, Darius. Looks like I’ll be familiarized with Detention soon enough.*

Boscha began to draw a spell circle in the air- Hunter smelled ash- *fire*. His first instinct was to dodge, but then he thought of something he had been considering.

Lucius's handwriting had been neat, scribbled next to a complicated drawing of some runes and Galderstones- *It is well known that witches can hijack other witches' spells with enough focus. Most common with Abomination and Plant Magic, but all spells can be turned against their caster with the right application. I theorize this is the principal behind why Belos needs a Conduit. Pieces of Grimwalker create one Superconductor. On a large scale, this power could concentrate hundreds of other witches' magic into one spell- Belos's plan? - on a small scale, could redirect and take control of other people's magic. How Golden Guard staff works, most likely. Oracle Ruby on top acts as a miniscule power source. Equivalent of bile sac- Grimwalker the channel and amplifier for it. Most work done by Grimwalker- amplifies and redirects 10x over. More research needed... Sigils?*

He had no idea how to actually do it- but if Lucius's notes were correct...

Hunter knew his magic theory well. His predecessor's theory was mostly sound. The same principle that Belos was going to exploit to murder every witch on the isles was the same principle Hunter had been using to protect every witch. And now, he'd protect himself.

He breathed deeply, and took a braced stance.

"Hunter, dodge!" Luz called.

As Boscha's stream of fire hit him, it burned white-hot for a second, before Hunter- felt it. He felt it like he felt his staff, now that he was looking for it. It was so simple- how come he never *realized*?

He felt his heart- a Galderstone- pump in response. The selkiedomus scales that made his flesh, the palistrom wood in his keratin, his (stonesleeper) lungs burning with a rich fire. He reached out and grabbed Boscha's magic with something he couldn't quite put into words- the connection of every piece of him coming together, making him *whole*- and he then let it go once it had gone through the pathway.

Fire shot out of his fingertips. It wasn't his magic- he didn't get to keep it, he couldn't draw a spell circle, he couldn't even really control it. But for that moment, he commanded it.

Boscha yelled as her own blast of fire was turned against her. She flew backwards with the force of it. Once she recovered, and saw the state of her eyebrows, she shrieked and ran off.

"I did it," Hunter stared at his hands. "I did it! Did you guys see that?"

Not all of it was redirected- he had minor burns on each palm, and felt distinctly... heated. Like he had a heat fever and was dehydrated. Gross.

"How did you do that?! That was amazing!" Luz exclaimed, throwing her hands in the air. "You literally grabbed her magic! Was that- Oh my gosh, it's just like Avatar, redirecting lightning, but it's redirecting magic! That's crazy- that's- Grimwalkers are so cool," she grinned.

"Cool or not," Willow had a palm slapped to her face, "You just burned another student."

“... Uh oh,” Hunter said.

‘HUNTER VAINGLORY-CLAWTHORNE,’ the Demon P.A system barked out, “REPORT TO PRINCIPAL BUMP’S OFFICE *IMMEDIATELY*.’

“See you after detention,” Gus patted his back.

--

“You’re my hero, Darius,” Raine said, “Eda hasn’t stopped bugging me about this ingredient. She apparently really needs it for whatever potion she’s working on. I don’t even know what it *is*.”

“Kiln ash,” Darius leaned in the doorway of his house. “The Abomination Coven had a pottery building. I kept some. It is quite good in transformation potions. I am... loath to ask what *Eda* needs it for.”

Darius blinked, catching movement in his peripheral vision. Hunter was running up the hill to the front door- home from school

“Me too,” Raine sighed. “If she- Oh! Hello, Hunter, how was-”

“Fine,” he said quickly, pushing past Darius and Raine to get inside. Darius watched as he bolted up the stairs.

“Uh oh,” Darius said after a minute. “I better deal with that.”

“You better,” Raine sighed, “Luz is with Eda and I today. I imagine I will be having a similar interaction when I get home.”

“Godspeed to you,” Darius gave a mock salute, “Remember, this weekend. We’re all going out for drinks. With Hexside starting up... I get the feeling we’re going to need it.”

Darius searched the house for a bit, reminded of Hunter’s first day here. Eventually, he checked what in hindsight should have been the most obvious place. He checked his own room. Lying face down, full starfished across Darius’s sheets, there Hunter was.

“Let me guess,” Darius sighed, “You got into a fight?”

“I don’t wanna talk about it,” Hunter grumbled.

“You’re in my room,” Darius left the door ajar as he stepped inside. “So I think you do, actually.”

“Uuuuuuuuuuuuuuugh.” Hunter sat up after a moment longer of groaning. “Other teenagers suck.”

“Did you at least win the fight?” Darius sat down in the lounge chair next to his desk.

“Of course I did,” he grumbled, “I even used a new technique exclusive to Grimwalkers. I redirected her magic! It was incredible! Not that Bump cared. All he cared about was that I injured the Captain of the Grudgby team.”

“Boscha Riegel,” Darius crossed his arms, “You’d be surprised at how many adult witches still care about high school Grudgby. I’m familiar. I take it she was rude to you?”

“To my friends. I didn’t really care when she was insulting me,” Hunter ran his hands down his face. “But then she- I don’t know, she called Willow a half-a-witch, and then insinuated I’d betray my friends like I did Belos. Belos- he *hurt* me. My friends wouldn’t ever be like that, I’d never *have* to betray them. It really just pissed me the *fuck* off.”

Darius hissed through his teeth. “I probably would’ve tried to fight her too. Teenagers can be some of the meanest people on earth.”

“Now I’m in detention,” Hunter whined. “I can’t learn anything new for like, a month... at least not in class.” At this he smirked. “Turns out making friends with Viney was a good idea.”

“I don’t want to know,” Darius put his hands up mockingly. “Lest they interrogate me.”

Hunter laughed. “... Thanks. Complaining about it is surprisingly helpful.”

Darius smiled. This was one of those moments- where raising Hunter was just as easy as talking. “Never underestimate the importance of bitching. It is key to happiness and good skin.”

Hunter smiled back, and then sighed. “I’d never do that.”

“Do what?”

“Betray my friends, or you,” Hunter met Darius’s eyes, “Like I said. I wouldn’t have to. You’d never hurt me like Belos did.”

“No,” Darius reached out, fondness overtaking him, and ruffled Hunter’s hair. “You wouldn’t.”

--

It had been two weeks since he got detention. As a result, he began the trek home in the evenings. Usually, he’d teleport all the way home in one swoop with either of his staves, but today...

The sun felt like honey, bathing everything in warm light. The breeze was cool, the trees rustled with that nice sound... It was like the world was made of pure gold.

Hunter couldn’t resist. He decided to walk the first bit home, through an empty bonesborough street.

He smiled to himself as he went, breathing that early fall air in deeply. It was...

“What a lovely evening. “Wouldn’t you agree, sapling?”

Hunter stopped dead in his tracks. He felt his lungs freeze in place, his blood running cold. He knew that voice. He knew it well.

They had never found Terra Snapdragon after the Day of Unity, had they?

He spun on his heel, Flapjack unfurling into his staff. “Back off,” he put as much ferocity into his tone as he could.

Terra, though most of her face was now scarred from the battle at the Palace, still had it in her to smirk. “Oh, do relax, youngling! I am not here as an adversary. I’m here as a friend! You’ve done such a good job, after all.”

Hunter felt confusion overtake him, and it reflected in how his posture loosened. “... Good job?”

“Of course!” She grinned, clapping her hands together. “You’ve just been marvelous at fooling that traitor Darius. Earning his trust, and everything!”

His eyes widened. No. She wasn’t implying...

“I wasn’t trying to fool him, Snapdragon,” He spat, but fear was growing within him.

“Nonsense, sapling,” she waved him off, “I mean, you knew he was trying to get into our dear Emperor’s mind... when it was clear he was going to get away with it, fawning like you did? Why, he let you right in! Marvelous work, Hunter. I couldn’t have sprouted it better myself.”

“I,” why was he unsure? She was lying, trying to make him doubt himself. He hadn’t just been... using Darius like that. He was- Darius wanted him there, and Hunter wanted to be there. Genuinely. Not as a trick. But Terra sounded so sure of her version of events- something about it was familiar. Belos would talk like that, sometimes. Spin a story of the truth, and Hunter swallowed it whole. “I...-”

“But,” She sighed loudly, interrupting Hunter’s protest. “The time has come to end your mission.”

“End...?” Hunter whispered. Why was he shaking so much?

“Yes,” Terra pulled out a vial from her plant-like hair. It was full of a bright green liquid- Terra dropped a few petals in it, and it turned clear. “The traitor must die. And this poison- it will make it quick and painless. I know you’re squeamish, darling. So I decided to make it... a kind death.”

No. No. No, no, no.

Why couldn’t he just say *no*?

Seeing his stricken expression, Terra placed the vial in his hand. “Complete your mission, darling,” she said gently, “And Belos will forgive all your transgressions. He’ll love you again. Like he used to, and once again, you will have a family.”

Hunter couldn’t breathe. He wanted to curl up and disappear.

He didn’t want to think about how... for a moment, the offer sounded... nice.

He’ll love you again.

“I like the hair, by the way. It suits you,” Terra said, turning to take her leave. “You look just like Belos with it long.”

Hunter stood there, shaking in place for a very long time. In his hand, the vial burned.

He could have poured it out onto the ground then. Could have spat on it and all it stood for. Could’ve told Terra *no. I will not go back to him.*

Instead, Hunter pocketed it slowly, and walked the whole way back to his empty house as if in a trance.

--

“*You bastard,*” Eberwolf pointed angrily, drunkenly, at Eda. “*Die Hard is not a Christmas movie. Humans are big stupid!*”

“They made the dang movie!” Eda yelled, glass of wine in her hand, half-way leaning her entire body weight on an extremely sober and extremely amused Raine (who was designated flyer).

Darius sipped his Lime Tears, feeling blurry around the edges. They were in a bar in downtown Latissa, one of the nicer ones, but not all *that* nice. The rebellion may be over, but their participants still met up. The six of them- Darius, Eberwolf, Eda, Raine, Alador, and Steve- were sitting in the back, and the drinks kept coming. And of course, as was tradition, an empty seat was left next to Darius, that nobody sat in and nobody ever would. For Lucius.

It was nice to relax like this every once and awhile. With Hunter in his household, Darius had basically gotten rid of all of his alcohol. He didn’t know if Hunter had any trauma related to it, but Darius was not going to find out, no sir. He was even crashing at the Owl House for the night, letting Hunter have free reign of his estate after he got off school. He’d never regret being cautious for Hunter, but. *Man*, was Lime Blood *good*.

“Ask Owlbert what he thinks,” Darius slurred, sipping his drink again. “Owlbert is literally smarter than both of you combined.”

He sat there for a while, watching this debate take over the entire table, watching booze slosh around. He felt out of it- and knew he was definitely falling asleep on the staff ride home.

Suddenly, he shot straight up. It was like a shiver had gone down his spine- like a ghost had its hand on his shoulder, and was trying to shake him out of his stupor.

(Looking back on this moment- he wondered if maybe, just *maybe*, Lucy was.)

“Did you all feel that?” He asked. In return, he got a bunch of weird looks.

“Uh, no,” Steve responded first. “You might be done with those drinks, buddy!”

“You have this look on your face,” Alador snarked, reaching out to flick Darius’s abomination hair. “What, is the alcohol too cheap for your oh-so-refined taste?”

“No, Alador,” He smacked his ex’s hand away, “It’s not the booze. I just... I get the feeling something is *wrong*.”

--

Hunter got home after the sun had long set. He pulled up his scroll, clicked on Luz’s icon, and pressed ‘call’.

“Hello?” Luz picked up within the last ring.

“Luz,” he tried to sound normal. “How goes?”

“Hey, Hunter!” She sounded so *happy*. She didn’t know what was on Hunter’s mind. “Um, I’m in the human realm right now, so if you wanted to hang out-”

“No, no, no,” he said quickly, “I just wanted to talk. Real quick. Like five minutes.”

“... Oookay,” Luz sounded suddenly suspicious. “Sounds good? Oh, say hi to Vee!”

“Hello, Vee,” Hunter obeyed. He got a distant ‘Hi Luz’s friend!’ in the background.

“Anyways,” Luz sounded like she was walking around, “What’s the haps, friend?”

Hunter struggled for a moment. He thought of telling her directly- and then quickly squashed the idea. He couldn’t bear her judgment right now. It was all too fresh.

“If you... had been forced to choose, between your Mom and Eda,” he settled on, “Who would you have chosen?”

The other line went silent. Oh, God, Hunter had crossed a line, hadn’t he-

“I honestly can’t say.” Luz sounded like she was realizing something big. “Both my Mom and Eda are really good to me. Having split time is working out really well. I don’t know if there would’ve been another solution to it that wouldn’t have destroyed me, really. But that’s because both my Mom and Eda are both so good to me.”

Hunter’s heart sank. Luz was more perceptive than he gave her credit for.

“You don’t have to tell me what’s wrong,” Luz said, “But just know that... the reason it’s a tough choice for me is because my Mom is awesome, and Eda is too. That’s why I’m glad I didn’t *have* to choose. They both love me so hard.”

“But if your mom was bad,” Hunter broke out, “Wouldn’t- wouldn’t you still love her?”

Luz again went quiet. “I don’t know, Hunter. I don’t have that experience. My mom *rules*. But I’ll tell you what. When you get the time, why don’t you come over to my house in the Human realm? Maybe meeting the lady herself will answer your question.”

“Really?” Hunter whispered. “You’d let me visit?”

“Mhm,” Luz sounded like she was smiling. “My mom’s dying to meet all my friends from the Boiling Isles. That includes you, stupid.”

Hunter smiled to himself. It came out weak, but it was real. “Thanks, Luz.”

“... Hunter... did something... happen?”

Hunter felt sick very suddenly. The vial was still in his pocket. Clear liquid. *It would be so easy...*

“No,” he said, evenly. “Just had weird thoughts again.”

“Ah, well,” Luz sounded like she didn’t totally believe him, but she let it go.

Please, no, Hunter thought in his traitorous brain, *Please push the issue further. Rip it out of me. I can’t have this in my soul. Get it out. Please.*

“I’ll see you soon, okay?”

Hunter nodded, out of it. “Okay. Bye.”

He hung up before Luz could say it back.

He stood in the bathroom- the dim lighting of the overhead skylight was his only illumination. Staring at himself in the mirror, he examined his hair. Long, braided back neatly, going past and in-between his shoulders.

‘It suits you,’ Terra had said, *‘You look just like Belos with it long.’*

He took the kitchen knife, and held it up to the edge of his hair. He didn’t have any better tools- but it would do.

For a moment, he hesitated. Growing it long had been... his decision. He had chosen it- after years of Belos making him cut it short. He knew now it was an effort to make him look more like the ‘original’, whoever that was. And his friends- they had taught him how to care for it, how to put it up neatly, how to make him look and feel like a new person.

Perhaps that too is why he wanted to cut it. Terra's poison still weighed heavily in his pocket. The longer it sat there, the more Boscha was right- he was a traitor. A traitor for even considering...

He didn't think that part of him that missed his uncle would ever become larger than a whisper. But so much of him was singing- *cut it off. Cut off your friends and Darius, so it hurts less when they find out you betrayed their trust and hurt them again. Cut off the symbol of your treachery- cut off your free will, your one decision. Sever your autonomy and come home to the palace.do*

He cut it all in one fell swoop.

In his hand, he held the braids. Like with any cut palistrom wood, it immediately began to turn into golden soot in his hands, burning away as if scorched in pure sun. It turned to dust, just as every staff Belos had ever consumed in front of him had.

He thought of Amity braiding his hair in the dead of night, surrounded by his friends.

As he watched his hair turn to nothing, Hunter tried to pretend he felt nothing at all.

Chapter End Notes

im not sorry

in the kiln

Chapter Summary

Things get worse before they get better.

Chapter Notes

well, here we are! the end of the main part of this series! I still have a couple one shots planned, but this is the final 'official' body work in Ceramics!! maybe. who knows. I am literally fucking crazy.

anyways!!!! this was quite a chapter to write. 10k fucking words!! what kind of mental illness DOES that, you ask? the kind where I have to be up at SIX AM for a MANDATORY MEETING on a SUNDAY thats what!!!!!!

there's also some art at the end of this chapter! please enjoy it!

now for the important part: HUGE FUCKING TRIGGER WARNING for suicidal thoughts, aftermath of gaslighting and abuse, arguing and yelling, extreme self-hatred, and implied torture and abuse.

and, HOLY SHIT GUYS. PLEASE HEED THE FUCKING WARNINGS ON THIS CHAPTER. IT GETS REAL BAD FOR A HOT SECOND.

if y'all are ready for that, then enjoy the last chapter of leatherhard!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Have a good day at school,” Darius told Hunter, trying to force himself to sound upbeat for the kid’s sake.

“Bye,” Hunter said in response, quiet and snappish. He was gone in a flash of red light.

Darius felt his shoulders sag instantly. It had been like this for two weeks now. If Hunter wasn’t speeding off to school, he was locked up in his room, and he’d only come down to get

a few snacks. *Never* a full meal. He didn't talk to Darius anymore, except when he had to, and he couldn't once meet his eyes.

Hunter had never liked eye contact, but this was different. It was like there was something weighing on Hunter and pulling his gaze to the earth. The last time Darius had seen Hunter that way was when he had first come to the house of Vainglory.

But for some reason... Darius felt that it wasn't *his* fault Hunter had been pulling away. That sensation, that chill down his spine that night at the bar- it still lingered every time he looked at Hunter. He was no oracle, but he just got the feeling *something* had happened. At school or elsewhere, Darius didn't care- he just wanted to find out what was wrong so he could fix it.

"This kid is gonna be the death of me," He said to the open air, "I don't think I'll ever get used to caring this much."

It was worth it, though. It would *always* be worth it.

Darius, donning his old rebel cloak, gracefully padded down the street, flowing with a quiet unnoticeable quality to the way he walked. Being a rebel for so long made it so he was very good at one thing- gathering information.

And he would be getting to the bottom of this. He'd start here- in the heart of downtown Latissa. Like blood pooling in legs after too long sitting down, gossip, rumors, they always ended up here in the dark smog of the city. So he wandered for a bit, eavesdropping both through his own ears and the ears of hundreds of little abominations wandering the streets.

Then, he began to sort through the noise.

"New shipment in this week-"

"Lizards in the damn soup-"

“I swear I heard of Terra Snapdragon lurking around Bonesborough as well-”

“We’re out of liquor-”

Darius blinked, zeroing in on that second to last voice. It wasn’t just that they mentioned his former coworker. It was that he knew that voice...

In a flash of abomination goo, he appeared in the place of his little minion, towering over Kikimora and her companion, a woman Darius recognized to be the former Captain.

They both yelped.

“Hello, ladies,” he said darkly, “I heard something about a Snapdragon?”

“You’re not responsible for this, right?” Darius crossed his arms, leaning back in his seat, having just explained Hunter’s strange heel-turn to Kikimora and The Captain as they sat beneath an awning in the heart of the town’s square.

Kikimora sipped her cheap cafe tea. “I know you’re protective of the little brat,” She said haughtily, “But I have had zero desire to go near him since everything fell apart! I’m content to rebuild my life without him constantly messing up my plans, thank you very much.”

Darius’s eye twitched. “I could do without you insulting my ward, *Kikimora* . But I get the point. I don’t really think it was you, anyways. Your loyalty to the emperor... well. He *did* almost succeed in murdering you. Terra, however...”

“She was one of his earliest supporters,” The Captain mused. “And she got away during the fight. The rumors are as terrifying to us as they are to you. She wasn’t exactly... pleased with our decisions in the aftermath.”

“I wasn’t about to continue serving a man who lost to a *child*,” Kikimora hmphed. “I’m *above* that.”

“Sure you are,” Darius muttered, then began thinking about what they had told him.

Terra Snapdragon was very good at worming her way into people’s brains. She knew the mind intimately- she could pinpoint your deepest fears and desires alike, and exploit both in perfect tandem. She was a gardener through and through- cultivating the strong, culling the weak, cutting off parts of you and propagating.

She made sense for... this. What didn’t make sense is why Hunter would *listen* to her.

Hunter was... much happier with Darius, wasn’t he? If Terra was trying to convince him to come to her side...

Hunter wouldn’t listen. *Surely not.*

“Thank you, ladies,” Darius stood. “For the information. But I’ll take my leave now.”

“Wait,” Kikimora said. “Listen, I... know I was not the nicest demon to Hunter. But... well. We were both in- a difficult position, with Belos. I don’t wish *harm* on him.. Uh, anymore... But I do on Terra, that *witch* . So... do your best, Darius.”

“Surprisingly heartfelt for you, Kiki,” Darius smirked, “I’ll pass the well wishes along.”

“I do not wish *well* for that brat-!”

--

Hunter thought, distantly and a bit delirious in his line of logic, that maybe the most logical option would be to just drink the poison himself.

Darius would get to live. Terra and Belos wouldn't get what they wanted from him if he was *dead*. His friends would be able to remember him fondly. And he could stop burdening everyone else with his endless stream of bullshit...

He eyed the vial for a moment. Then, he re-pocketed it, walking out of the Hexside bathroom.

He had exams to worry about, anyway. There would be time to figure out what to do after.

Hunter walked down the hall, a ship unmoored, floating aimlessly through a dark sea. He felt fake, and though he knew he couldn't *actually*, he felt like he could feel every part of himself that he was made of. The palistrom wood of his skin and hair, the scales piecing together his joints. He felt all of it as he moved, both hyper-aware and not aware at all.

He hadn't slept much ever since Terra had talked to him, and it was starting to really take its toll on him. He knew he should at least try- but those first few nights, the nightmares had been so bad, and he knew whenever he got scared, whenever he was checking those dark places in his room at two in the morning for a man who wasn't there- that Darius would come, and comfort him. And he didn't deserve comfort. Not when he couldn't even tell him what he had been asked to do.

Not when some dark part of him was considering genuinely *doing* it.

He couldn't do that to Darius- let the man care for him like that when Hunter was picturing his demise. The mental images of Darius- dying on the ground of his own house by Hunter's hand- they made him feel ill, but Hunter just couldn't stop thinking about it. Taking advantage of Darius's kindness was something Hunter had to stop doing now.

The same was true of his friends. He had been pulling away- ignoring their texts, skipping lunch, sitting away from them in class. They had been the ones to save him from Belos in the first place. If he ended up just going back and therein throwing out all the effort they had put into making him a person worth *something*, he could at least make it easier on them by being an asshole about it.

He couldn't be *Hunter* around people anymore- Hunter had died in that empty street under

Terra's watchful eye. Hunter had already drank the poison. To replace what he was trying to kill, he instead brought back an old, dead persona, and walked around as the Golden Guard. He really was just missing the mask.

" *Hunter* ."

Hunter stopped his walk down the hallway. He didn't turn around at Luz's voice. Seeing their faces just made it more difficult for all of them.

"You've been acting strange lately," Willow said, and Hunter could hear the sound of her crossing her arms. "Not talking to us, not showing up to practice, hell, flat out ignoring us when we try and talk to *you*-"

"So?" Hunter bit back. "What I do is none of your business."

"Of course it is," Gus threw his hands in the air. "We're friends."

Are we still? Hunter thought dejectedly. *Don't say that, Gus. You'll just make it worse.*

"I thought you were trying to grow out your hair," Amity pointed out, "You cut it all off. Back to the old style. This isn't- it's not like you."

"Maybe I was just feeling nostalgic. Or maybe it's none of your business," Hunter spat, reaching up to feel his hair. He had been cutting it back to the way Belos liked it. It only made him feel a little *gross* , anyways. "Maybe I just have better things to do than spend all my time chaperoning you idiots."

"Dude, what's wrong with you?" Gus asked.

"Nothing's wrong," he lied, "In fact, I'm better than ever. On my own, I get a lot more done without you all slowing me down."

His friends were silent. Good.

"What the hell, Hunter?" Luz sounded angry. *Even better.*

If they started hating him now, then when they found out about the poison, or something in Hunter snapped and he actually *used* it and ran back to Belos, it would be easy to keep hating him. Who was he to deny them the simple pleasure of loathing someone?

(There was still that third option. The easy way out. But... no. Hunter couldn't- he didn't want to leave Flapjack without a witch.)

It's not like they had always liked him, anyways. So *all* of them would soon be returning to the *before*.

Hunter's chest felt tight.

"Fine," Willow spat, "Throw us out just like Boscha said. I don't *care*. Just show up to practice."

That hurt. That *really hurt*. Hunter tried to settle back into apathy- it almost worked. But that dull sting in his chest remained.

"Alright," he said quietly, and continued down the hall.

--

"Just like I thought," Luz sighed. "Something bad *did* happen. It started with the phone call a few weeks ago- he was asking about if I had to choose between Mom and Eda, where I'd go. He also asked me if my Mom had been bad to me, whether I'd still love her or not."

Willow sucked in air through her teeth. It was clear to Luz she was hurt by Hunter's behavior, but she was equally concerned, too. "You don't think the Emperor's gotten to him?"

"Belos is still in jail," Gus hummed, "But I bet you *anything* he still has loyalists. I one-hundred percent think he's being put up to this. We... We were good friends. Something has to be wrong. It has to," Gus whispered.

Amity sighed. "I've acted like this before when my Mom was breathing down my neck... you guys remember how I was when you all were getting expelled. We need to figure this out before someone gets hurt."

"Okay," Luz clapped her hands together, "He said he'd be at Flyer Derby practice. Knowing Hunter, that means he *absolutely* will be. So, we strike then! I'll knock him down, and then when he lands with his little teleportation trick, there's a few seconds of cooldown. That's when Willow will grab him!"

Willow grinned. "Sounds like an *excellent* plan."

--

He showed up on the Flyer Derby pitch as promised, Flapjack in hand, green paint on his face. He stood apart from his teammates. Their words as they talked amongst themselves was fuzzy, like Crystal Ball static.

He just wanted to lay down and sleep. But he told them he'd be there, that he'd still play. And that part of him that just- wanted to run back to them, tell them all he was *sorry, please, he was sorry*, made it so he felt like he couldn't let them down. Not on this. He had already done enough.

"Hunter, did you get any of that?" Willow sounded annoyed, maybe. Hunter jolted, tension filling his body. He was twice as on-guard as usual due to how exhausted he was, and annoyance meant anger, and anger meant...

He shook his head. "... No. Sorry."

Willow sighed. "Luz, again."

"Usually, we all practice against each other," Luz said, twirling her wrist dramatically. "But today, Willow wanted to work on your guys' teamwork. And so, I will be your opponent!"

"Just you?" Hunter raised an eyebrow. "That'll be a quick game."

"Not just me," Luz grinned at him, "Remember, Hunter. Now, it's *never* just me! And there's one way to keep the Collector calm... playing games!"

She summoned forth her Palisman- a bat named Azura- and turned it into a staff. She slammed the butt of the staff into the ground, and in a flash of light...

Luz's hair turned white, and her skin became split down the middle- half yellow, half blue. The Collector was awake.

" ***Your opponent*** ," her voice came out doubled, "***Is us !*** "

Hunter gulped.

It went wrong surprisingly late into things, all things considered.

Hunter had been holding his own relatively well- he had to, considering how off their teamwork was. Turns out having people be upset with you was not great when you were on

the same sports team.

The Collector and Luz, or the Col *luz* , if you were Luz trying to make things simple (no. absolutely not, Luz. thats a stupid name), flashed around the arena, switching back and forth between double-teaming and being just Luz. Powered up like this, and piloting her body with the help of an ancient deity, Luz was a one man army. And she of course was using this power to be a *great* Flyer Derby opponent.

Hunter had grabbed her flag, and was trying to race to the pole, but there was really only so much he could do, running on three hours of sleep and basically trying to win this by himself.

“Too slow!” The Collector taunted from where he appeared next to Hunter, sticking their tongue out at him, and they ripped the flag from his hand. Luz flashed back into herself, shooting upwards on Azura.

“Hey!” Hunter yelled, indignant, giving chase. They zoomed across the field at top speeds, and then-

A chill went down Hunter’s spine. He knew what was going to happen right before it did.

The Collector grinned, stopped dead right as Hunter was going too slow to stop, and with one fell kick-

He was falling.

He still had his staff- it would be trivially easy to teleport safely to the ground. But...

"He's not landing, " Willow was yelling distantly, *"Why isn't he landing?!"*

" Hunter! "

God, was he *tired*.

Flapjack was chirping at him, yelling at him to *fly* , but he-

He was so tired. He was tired of fighting, of- getting better, and then having it all stripped away from him because he was too stupid to see things as they were. He could've just told Darius immediately, Darius wouldn't have held it against him if he had just come clean right away about what had happened.

You look like Belos with your hair long.

You look like Belos.

(Hunter worried he was starting to think and act like him, too.)

And so, Hunter fell.

His back hit the ground *hard* . Hunter felt pain erupt all over his body, before it suddenly became very numb. Pins and needles all over, burning pain, cracked ribs. His head was pounding, and the sun was far too bright. He just wanted to sleep...

"Hunter, come on, stay awake! Don't fall asleep-" Vineys words became muffled as she landed over him. He was so tired...

The last thing he saw before it all went black was Luz's horrified face.

--

When he came to, there was far too much noise and dim lighting.

He blinked his eyes open, wiping the blur out of his vision. His head hurt worse now, and every sensation in his body felt like it was muffled by cotton. He felt disgusting, covered in bandages and healing glyphs, the post-nap nausea one often got absolutely choking his throat. He somehow managed to feel worse than he did upon waking up that morning. If it even was the same day- he knew instinctively that he was, medically speaking, *fucked up* . He wouldn't be surprised to find out he was out for multiple hours, if not days.

He tuned in to reality to hear the sound of Luz crying.

"I-I didn't mean to hit him so hard! I, I thought he'd catch himself!" She sobbed into Amity's arms.

"It's not your fault, Luz," Willow assured, and Hunter realized then she was right next to him in the chair by his bedside. "We *all* thought he would. I don't know why he didn't..."

"Something must be really wrong, then. Darius has been telling me how worried he's been-" Eda's voice sent a deep, weakening sadness through his veins. Darius was worried...? Eda was here? They were all here?

Hunter tried to sit up, and was pushed down by Viney. "Don't try to move too much. You've got a bad head injury."

"Hunter! He's awake, guys!" Luz exclaimed.

"Stop yelling," Hunter groaned, "head hurts..."

"Sorry," she whispered. "I didn't mean to knock you down so hard."

Hunter sunk in his seat. Part of him thought, maybe she did mean it and was lying. Maybe she hated him that much already. Another part of him wanted to tell her that no. He deserved

that.

He closed his eyes. "I'm fine. You all need to stop worrying about me."

"And why would we do that, little prince?"

Darius .

Hunter froze solid at the voice. He looked up, eyes wide, to meet Darius's gaze. He looked concerned.

Shit. Of course they had called him. Darius was down as his guardian, still. And this was one of Hunter's worst injuries to date.

"What happened?" Darius asked Viney.

"He fell off his staff during practice," Viney took her clipboard from Puddles's beak, pointing to some diagram. "Had some minor bleeding in the back of his head, but I don't think it'll affect him. I healed him quickly."

Hunter sunk in his bed.

"What *really* happened?" Darius asked Hunter pointedly.

Hunter suddenly found all eyes on him. He felt shaky, and terrified in a childish way. They were all staring at him like they already knew what he had been hiding, like they just wanted to see him squirm.

He... had to tell them, didn't he? He'd been acting *too* strange. They'd caught on. And now they wanted him to admit he was trouble.

He looked down at his shaking hands. He was still in his uniform, which meant...

No. He... He *couldn't* .

(He *had* to.)

He didn't know why he had started crying. Barely even noticed he was, until Willow reached out to wipe the tears off his cheek.

"Please talk to us," she whispered.

The room was instantly full of voices, asking Hunter to *please, just tell them what was wrong, please, just talk to them! They'd understand, they would!*

They'd forgive him! They'd love him!

(*They* always would, wouldn't they?)

Hunter *broke* . He reached into his pocket, and with shaking hands, pulled out the vial. He wiped the tears off his face, slipping into a careful stone-faced expression, and he set the vial down on his lap for everyone to see.

The room went dead silent.

"Hunter," Eda said, with a tone that said she already knew the answer to the question she was asking, "What is *this* ?"

He took a deep breath. “Two weeks ago,” he began, voice cracking, “Terra Snapdragon found me in the street, and made me an offer.”

He didn’t need to look up to see their shocked faces. He watched their shadows dance with surprise across his bed. He closed his eyes- he wanted to pretend they weren’t there for a little while longer. He wanted to pretend he was confessing his sins to an empty room.

“She gave me this. She- she told me if I used it, to.. To kill Darius, then.. Belos would welcome me again with open arms. He’d love me again. And- she told me- she told me I had, I had done a good job of-” he took a moment to breathe, snot and tears running down his face again, God, he was so tired of crying, of feeling this crushing guilt. “Of earning Darius’s trust and infiltrating her household. I- I tried to tell her that that wasn’t my- my intention, but... maybe that was Belos’s plan all along for me? S... she sounded so confident that that was what I was doing. And maybe Belos was playing at this all around, and made me the perfect spy. Because I considered doing it.”

He looked Darius directly in the eyes. “I considered going through with killing you,” he spat out. “Cause some sick part of me wants Belos’s love. Are you happy now? Now that you know?”

There was silence. Darius was staring at him, expression blank and unreadable.

Then, Darius tilted his head towards the group that was gathered. “Out,” he demanded. “Everyone who isn’t Hunter, leave.”

Everyone took a minute, but upon realizing Darius wasn’t asking, everyone filed out of the room. Willow spared one last glance at him before the door closed.

Hunter felt fear paralyze him. *This was it.* He’s alone in a room with Darius. After admitting to thinking about murdering him. After admitting to being a traitorous sack of dead weight. Darius *had* to kick him out. Or worse. God knows Hunter deserved worse for keeping such a big secret.

He closed his eyes as Darius approached. His entire body felt painfully tense. Breathing hurt for many reasons, the broken ribs and sheer agony of having to reckon with everything that had happened making it so he tasted blood on his lips.

The bed next to Hunter dipped. Darius- was sitting down next to him.

And slowly, as if not to startle Hunter, Darius wrapped an arm around him.

“I’m so sorry.” he whispered to Hunter. “For what she asked you to do. For not realizing what had happened sooner. No one should have to live with that weight.”

Hunter felt worse than if he had been stricken. No. No, *no*. Darius was... being kind to him. That’s not what was supposed to happen.

“No,” he pulled away, “No, you- you can’t. You can’t keep saying *you’re* sorry when- when I’m the one who fucked up!”

“Hunter,” Darius said sadly.

“No!” Hunter was yelling now. “No, *fuck* you! You can’t keep doing this, Darius! Stop acting like you care about me when all I do is- mess things up for you! I- I lounge around your house and I make a mess, I eat all your food and I’m rude, and annoying, and- and I don’t do anything to make up for it. I am a waste of your space and resources and you just- you keep being nice about it, but- but. Now, now I’ve shown you what’s really fucking wrong with me, haven’t I? I miss Belos.”

“Hunter...” Darius was a bit louder this time, but Hunter couldn’t stop now that he started.

“I miss the man who abused me my entire life,” he hissed out, “Despite all you’ve given me for nothing in return, I still- I miss Belos. And I miss the normalcy of him hurting me. Every week getting a new scar and being told I’m a disappointment and oh, lord, *so much worse*. Because it made sense,” Hunter sobbed, “I’m a bad kid. I’m a bad kid, and I need to prove- that I’m worthy of being loved, or at the very least housed. I’ve done nothing but burden you. So w-when Terra gave me a chance to- to go back to the one person who treated me like I deserved, I considered it! I was going to kill you! *Stop being nice to me!* ”

“ *Hunter!* ” Darius said forcefully. “Please, *breathe* .”

Hunter scrubbed at his face, if anything, breathing harder. “He probably *would’ve* killed me. If I didn’t kill me first. I- I thought about drinking the poison to solve everyone’s problems and I’m wishing I did, because then you wouldn’t have to know the *thing* you let into your home. I’m just- the next Belos, horrible and cruel to the people who love me. I have to go back to him, don’t you get it? He’s the only one who sees me as I am. An awful person who needs the evil beat out of him. So you don’t need to care about me. Not when I’ve ruined everything,” his voice broke, “I’m sorry. I’m sorry for- for wasting your time-”

Darius pulled him into a full hug, this time. And Hunter wanted- he wanted so badly to accept it, to just sob into Darius’s shoulders like after a nightmare, to be a *kid* again. To cry like he was six and had just broken his favorite toy. But he couldn’t. He- why didn’t Darius *get it* ?

“Hunter,” Darius murmured softly, “You know it wasn’t your fault. It’s not your fault- you’re still just a kid. Terra was *gaslighting* you. You were never sent to spy on me- Belos isn’t *that* clever. You’re just someone who needed a home. And I’d- I’d never expect anything from you in exchange. I chose to take you in. I chose to care for you. I will *continue* to choose that. It doesn’t matter how bad of a kid you think you are- I know you’re a great kid deep down. And even if you weren’t... well, I’ve chosen to care for you anyways.”

“B-but,” Hunter protested, “But Terra- I just *stood* there! I didn’t throw out the poison or tell you, for weeks I’ve just been frozen-”

“It’s called a freeze response,” Darius moved Hunter’s hair out of his face, “It’s common when you’re reminded of something bad in your past. And Terra- she knows how to use people’s traumas against them. She knew you’d crave the normalcy of your abuser. Which isn’t evil, it’s actually quite common amongst people who have been hurt that way. She took advantage of that. I will *never* blame you for the ways shitty adults treat you.”

Hunter sobbed. “You don’t get it. Belos- he wants me back. If I d-don’t go he’ll hurt you. He’ll make me hurt you. I don’t want you to die. I don’t...”

“I won’t let him near you ever again,” Darius said firmly. “I won’t make that mistake twice.”

Hunter began leaning into Darius’s embrace. But- he wasn’t done fighting it yet. No matter how badly he wanted to give in and let himself be cared for.

He slammed his fist into Darius’s chest. Once. Twice. *Slam* . Trying to make him let go.

Darius held firm.

“Stop it,” Hunter whimpered, tears falling freely, “Stop it. Stop loving me more than my own family did.”

“I’m *never* going to stop,” Darius said, like it was the simplest thing in the world.

Hunter felt the last piece of him give way. He fully let Darius embrace him, clinging onto him for dear life, face buried in his shoulder. He didn’t know how long they stayed like that for- Hunter sobbing out all his fear from the past two weeks.

“I w-was so *scared* ,” his voice came out breaking, “I was so scared she’d come b-back! I can’t- I don’t- I can’t see her again, or him, he’ll- *I don’t want him to hurt me again* -!”

“I know,” Darius sounded just as upset, pulling Hunter as close as possible. “And I won’t ever let him.”

Hunter whimpered. “Y.. you’re never going to throw me out, are you? There’s nothing I can do to make you...”

“No.” Darius ran a hand through Hunter’s hair. It was already starting to grow out again. “There isn’t a single thing.”

Hunter leaned against Darius for a long time, and felt whole again. He didn't think anyone would ever love him unconditionally- not even Belos had. But there was Darius.

And with Darius, the nightmare was over.

After Hunter had fully calmed down, Darius pulled away slowly. "I think you still need to talk to your friends," he said, gently. "Probably without me. This needs to be you."

Hunter swallowed. "I... okay."

"Here," Darius slowly unfurled his staff, detaching Azul from the top, and handing her to Hunter. "An extra friend."

He nodded, looking at the bird. Azul chirped gently. She wasn't his palisman, so he didn't fully understand, but... he got the message.

On the mantle. You're still up there, on the mantle. You can always go home.

Hunter closed his eyes, breathing in and out the way Gus had taught him all those months ago. "I'm ready."

Darius got up, opened the door, and stepped into a hall.

After a moment, Luz, Willow, Amity, and Gus all stepped through the door.

He looked up at them, bird on each shoulder. Flapjack was pressed into the curve of his neck, while Azul had her tail unfurled and was jumping around, doing some sort of offensive dance. Protection- but Hunter didn't need it. He felt... strangely calm. Like no matter the outcome of this conversation... he'd live, anyways.

They all stared at him expectantly, as they took their spots by his bedside. He took a long, calming breath again, and then spoke.

“I don’t expect your forgiveness,” Hunter looked down at his hands as he twiddled his thumbs, “Ever. I was an asshole, on *purpose* . And I’m sorry for treating you guys that way. You deserve, an explanation though, and... it’s stupid, but I kept thinking that maybe if I held you at an arms distance... It’d make it easier to swallow when whatever happened with Belos happened. I didn’t want him to come after you all again. And I didn’t want you to... feel like you could’ve done more for me. This was- all me. All my thoughts and decisions. Again, I’m- sorry. I should’ve known better.”

They were all quiet for a moment. Willow spoke up first. “You’re right. That is stupid. No matter how much of a dick you were, we still would’ve missed you.”

Hunter looked up at that. Luz had her arms crossed, but she was giggling a little. Gus was shaking his head, but... all of them were still smiling fondly.

“I didn’t- what?”

“Sorry, it’s just funny,” Amity laughed, “You still haven’t gotten it, have you? It’s okay. It took me a while, too.”

“Weirdos stick together,” Luz explained, “You do know that if you had gone back to Belos, we would have chased you, right?”

“What? But why!” Hunter threw his hands in the air, disturbing the two birds.

“Well,” Willow sat down on the bed, “It... did hurt a lot, when you were acting like that. And I’m still upset, obviously, but like... *dude* . Belos was your whole world for like, what, ten years?” She shrugged. “Knowing that puts things into perspective. And I know you know that... an apology is a promise for changed behavior. You’re not going to make this mistake twice. I trust you that much. We all do.”

Hunter’s expression fell back down to his lap. “I didn’t... I don’t know. I don’t like hurting people. It makes me feel like I’m acting like him. So I’m sorry.”

“We know you are,” Gus poked his cheek, making him look back up. “I forgive you, for what it's worth. I got a feeling from the start there was something else going on... you once promised not to mess with me, and I know you're a do-or-die about promises.”

Hunter nodded, rubbing the back of his neck. “I'm sorry I broke it...”

“You don't have to keep apologizing, dude,” Luz said, “I'm considering us even since I broke, like, all of your ribs.”

“I've been a jerk, too, for similar reasons,” Amity shrugged, “It'd be weird if I held it against you when none of these guys held it against me.”

Hunter closed his eyes tightly. It was- painful, almost. Being accepted. No, that wasn't it. It was good- so much emotion that it was too much for him at once.

“Thank you,” he settled on, “For not throwing me away.”

“Never,” Willow declared, “Bad Girl Coven for life.”

His friends all moved in to hug him, or put him in a temporary headlock and ruffle his hair, or punch his arm in a friendly manner- and Hunter let it happen, washing over him like sunlight.

“I'll get better,” he murmured. “I promise.”

Luz took his hand. “We know you will. Perhaps now more than ever... you should get that answer to your question. You still okay with coming to my house in the human realm sometime soon?”

Hunter blinked. “I'm not uninvited?”

“*Dude*,” Luz ran a hand through her hair, “After that nonsense with Terra? You're like, *triple* invited. You need some good comfort food and a great adult to watch TV with. And a

new place might help you feel more... I dunno, yourself.”

Hunter nodded, leaning back in his bed. “Thank you again. All of you. For... everything. And being so-.. For being my friends. Will... I see you all around?”

“Like that’s even a question,” Willow replied.

And that was all Hunter felt he needed to keep his promise.

--

“You’ll be back later?” Hunter asked quietly, in the morning. He had new bandages applied to his whole body, especially around the head, and was lying in the infirmary until he was well enough to be moved back home. Darius hoped it was soon. He needed to be able to ask Hunter about adopting him as soon as possible after all that. He needed his kid to be *recognized* as his kid.

But in order to do that... well.

“Of course I will,” Darius could still ruffle his hair, and so he did. “I’ll be back as soon as I’m done. I just have some business to take care of.”

Hunter sank back into his blankets, and nodded. Darius waved goodbye, and then exited the room.

As soon as he was outside, he let his softness fade from both his face and his heart.

Darius hadn’t been this full of rage in many, many years. Annoyance, sure. Apathy, plenty of that. Anger, occasionally.

But this was a deep, primeval rage that permeated every cell in his body and made him *itch* .

He wanted violence- he wanted to rid this world of that disgusting stain on witchkind and humanity alike. It was like there was a storm inside him, waiting to strike an unsuspecting onlooker.

He began to stride out of the school, one destination, one goal in mind. He would keep his promise to Hunter- he would make sure Belos would never dream of coming near him again.

“Wait.”

Darius paused, then turned. Willow Park met his gaze. He recognized a similar anger in her eyes.

“I know what you’re doing,” She said simply, voice even. “If you’re going to go after Terra, then you’ll need me.”

“And why would I need you?” Darius raised an eyebrow, but he was more than willing to hear her out. Violence was better with acquaintances.

“She’s a plant witch, is she not? And, not to be arrogant, but I’m probably the only other plant witch on the Isles who can match her strength. Two against one. I’ll let you take Belos on yourself- but I want in on Terra getting her comeuppance.” Willow slammed her fists together.

“Very well,” Darius smirked, “It’s nice to see Hunter’s friends care about him. The plan is as follows...”

They found Terra waiting for them. She was at the edge of Bonesborough, tending to a patch of wildflowers.

“Oleander,” she sighed happily, “An import from the human realm. Extremely beautiful, takes well to our soil... and extremely deadly, as well. Combined with the right ingredients... well, it should’ve killed you, Darius.” She looked up, turning towards the two of them. “But you’re here. I take it the brat failed his test, then?”

Willow and Darius said nothing. Darius simply kept walking towards her, Willow standing in a ready stance before him.

“Nothing to say?” Terra was still smirking, but Darius could see she was losing her edge as he continued to approach. “Well, then I suppose you have no need for information on what Belos wants with Hunter. The Day of Unity is as good as dead- but he has a new plan.”

Darius kept walking forward. It was here where Terra seemed to see something in his eyes that she recognized, and she went pale. She drew a circle in the air- and plants erupted around them both, accompanied by a gust of wind.

“I’d not approach any further, if I were you,” she threatened, “I’m not above murdering you both.”

“What a coincidence,” Darius said lowly, “I am also not above this scenario ending in death.”

It was then Willow did her job. She mirrored Terra’s movements, and with a spell circle of her own- began to attempt asserting her will over Terra. They battled through pure energy over control of the plants around them- but Darius knew the outcome before it began.

Terra had years of experience, yes. But Willow Park was a girl made of pain and anger. And Plant Magic would *always* be an artwork of emotions.

Terra gasped for air, trying to breathe as the vine around her neck choked her. More plants wrapped around her wrists and bound her fingers, preventing her from drawing any more circles.

“We’re not going to kill you,” Darius sighed. “I may not be above murder, but Willow is only fifteen. I don’t have any intention to make a child a murderer... I’m not like you. No, I have a much worse fate in mind.”

At the gates of the Palace, Willow and Darius walked Terra up the stairs, into the former throne room where the Portal to the Human Realm lay.

“You are to walk through that gate,” Darius announced, “And never return to the Boiling Isles. It is set to take you to a desert in a place called Nevada.”

Terra’s eyes widened, her lip curling into a sneer. “You wouldn’t dare...”

“I would,” Darius crossed his arms, “I invoke my status as representative of the Boiling Isles Democratic Council. From this day onwards, you are permanently exiled from your home. You will walk those boiling sands with no plant life for miles. And you will *die* alone of your own ineptitude. You’ve never been good with growing Cacti, have you, Terra?”

She let out a low growl, and moved to draw a circle with her foot- Only to find it instantly trapped by another vine.

“I wouldn’t,” Willow warned, “We could always send you with a broken leg.”

Terra’s eyes widened. Then, she bowed her head and smiled.

“Well done,” Terra commenced, “You’ve stooped to my level.”

“I can live with that for Hunter’s sake,” Darius shrugged. “But you won’t live for long.”

Through the portal, Terra walked alone.

Darius turned to Willow. “I’ll take it from here. You go home. You’ll grow up to be a very powerful witch indeed.”

Willow nodded to him, rubbing the back of her neck. “And you’ll be an excellent adoptive Dad to Hunter... even if being a good person is kinda off the table.”

“A good person does not make a good father,” Darius swept out of the room, “Not when you’re dealing with those who are neither.”

Belos’s cell was cold, dark, damp, and beneath several miles of earth. This part of the dungeon was burrowed deep into a rotting cyst of the Titan, and it smelled like utter death. A fitting place for a man whose very soul rotted with the walls of his cage.

Darius walked down the hall, letting his steps echo as he approached the holding cell. He saw, from a distance, that Belos was slumped against the fleshy wall. His hair grew wild and matted thick with oil and sweat, his curse having spread across most of his face, his eyes dim and unfocused but still filled with utter hatred for the people who had trapped them here. However, once he heard someone approaching, the man smirked, and sat up.

“Ah, Hunter,” and Darius-

The thought that Belos was so sure Hunter would come was enough to make him turn his arm into abomination, grab Belos by the throat, and slam him into the wall hard enough to draw blood.

“GHk-!” Belos scrambled, clawing at Darius’s grip. Darius couldn’t feel it. He felt like he was being controlled by something outside of himself- that white hot fury that puppeted him around like a ghost.

“For a long time, I *resented* Hunter.” Darius began. “For a long time- I thought he was the one responsible for Lucius’s death. His blind obedience to you sickened me. But now I realize something, as I learn more about what really happened in those Palace walls. You’re such a pathetic man that only one person has ever loved you unconditionally... and you

murdered him in cold blood because he didn't agree with your narrow world view. And for your entire, long, withering life... you've been trying to reclaim that love. And it never worked. Wanna know why?"

Belos struggled against Darius, gritting his teeth. "You l-little-"

"Because you're just *hollow* inside," Darius released Belos, who fell to the floor gasping. "You've got no soul, and you've got no redeeming traits. There's just nothing at all. You killed the Golden Guards because they refused to pretend otherwise. You hurt a child because you could. But now..." Darius let out a low laugh. "You've got no power. You're in the decaying body of an ancient thing."

Belos scrambled to his knees, trying to draw a glyph in the dirt, before Darius reared back his foot, and kicked him right in the face. He flew backwards, hitting the wall with a shout.

"Ah, ah, ah..." Darius tsked. "Behave. I'm not finished, Emperor. It's so rude of you to act out. After I didn't kill you on the Day of Unity for what you've done to my kid."

"Your kid?" Belos choked out, sneering. "I made him- I made him what he was."

Darius shook his head. "No, you didn't. You are a fool- see, pain doesn't make people. Love does that. The pain is... inconsequential to that." Darius's eyes narrowed, face screwing up in an angry sneer that mirrored Belos's expression. "And all you *did* was cause Hunter pain. But now..."

"Now, what?" Belos's face twisted into a sickening grin. "Now, you'll fix it? The damage you caused by your own inaction? I hurt him for his own good-"

Call it a strike of inspiration- but in that moment, Darius recalled what Hunter had said about Belos breaking his nose. That he had grabbed Hunter by the hair, and slammed his face into the concrete. So, now, Darius watched as Belos's eyes widened at the feeling of Abomination claws in his hair-

And his face was slammed into the ground so hard, it cracked the stone below. Belos screamed in agony, and Darius found that despite his desperate need to pretend he wasn't

enjoying this, he wasn't fighting the smile crawling across his face.

"How wonderful. Now you really do match your nephew," Darius taunted. "What a shame you'll never see him again. Me, however."

He jerked Belos up by the hair, forcing the man to look at him. He knelt down by him, green eyes meeting blue.

"Listen closely," he growled out, "You made Hunter's life a living hell for years. You killed my husband. Our lives are in tatters because of *you*. So the deal is this- every time we are reminded of that pain. Every time I hear a song and remember Lucius, or every time Hunter has a nightmare of you standing in the corner of his room at night- I will come here, and I will make you wonder if tonight's the night I reunite you with your brother in *hell*."

Belos's eyes were wide, and much to Darius's delight, full of pure fear.

"I've been learning a lot about human religion," Darius said, after dropping Belos's head to the floor and making to leave. "So I will say this. You better pray I eventually forgive you, Phillip Wittebane. Your God certainly won't."

And with that, Darius left Belos alone to rot.

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"Thank you for having me, Mrs. Noceda," Hunter bowed politely.

"The pleasure is all mine, Hunter," Camilla smiled kindly, "I love meeting Luz's friends. Come in, come in! It's cold outside."

Hunter stepped inside, taking his shoes off by the door, the warmth of the house removing the chill from his bones. Connecticut was colder than he thought it would be- the frost woke him up, made him feel alive again, and the warmth of the Noceda's household made him feel like he was living.

Luz was in the hallway, bouncing with glee. "I'm so excited you have no idea."

"I wouldn't have guessed," Hunter teased, setting his boots in place. Before he could stand all the way back up, Luz had grabbed him by the hand and was dragging him through the house.

"Mom's finishing dinner. She made a classic chicken and rice dish, since I know you have texture issues and probably couldn't eat a bunch of the other stuff she makes, but *Locrio de Pollo* is really good and I think you'll like it. Vee wants to meet you but she's shy- so it might take a couple minutes for you guys to start talking, but that's okay! I'm here! Oh, and after, I was thinking we could-"

Hunter smiled, rolling his eyes fondly as Luz continued to ramble. Really, he was just happy to be there, to be invited.

He and Darius had promised to talk more when he had gotten home. But they both had agreed Hunter needed a change of pace. Just for the night. It made Hunter happy to know Darius respected and agreed with Hunter's idea, but... it also made him sad that it had to happen. That Hunter had let things fall apart so thoroughly that.. He couldn't be at home right now.

Luz made it easier- she moved so fast, it was hard for Hunter to dwell on everything that had happened for long. She pulled him into her room- and Hunter immediately had to stifle a laugh.

It was just so... Luz, this room. Good Witch Azura posters everywhere, even ones for the... not so great adaptations. Rocks, and little anime figurines, and so many plushies. So many.

Oh yeah, and on the bed, there was a sleeping Basilisk. Hunter did a double take, jumping.

“Gh- oh, is that Vee?” He whispered, not wanting to wake her. “Luz. Luz, you fool. I was the Golden guard! I worked for the Emperor! *The one who probably made it so she had to run ?*”

“Relax, *Gatherer* , she knows you’re coming,” Luz elbowed him.

At this, Vee opened her eye a crack, and then sat up. “Oh,” she rubbed her eyes, then blinked both her sets of eyelids at them. “I almost forgot! Hi, Luz’s friend- this one is Hunter, right? The guy?” Vee squinted at him.

Hunter gave a small, awkward wave. “Yes. That would be me. I am the guy.”

Vee gave a wide-toothed smile, before shaping herself into a more-humanoid form. She looked like Luz, just with some freckles and a more put-in-place haircut. It was eerie.

“Cool trick,” Hunter complimented, still awkward.

“Luz mentioned you were a Grimwalker, right?” Vee rubbed the back of her head when Hunter nodded, standing up. “I actually knew more about it than her. Turns out Basilisks and Grimwalkers are kind of similar. Magic behaves... weirdly around us.”

“You absorb it for food, I can redirect it with focus.” Hunter nodded. “I’m familiar. I didn’t... work on the Basilisk project when the Emperor had me, but... I tried to pry.” He crossed his arms defensively, trying not to show how weirdly guilty he felt about it. Then again, he felt weirdly guilty about most things.

But Vee just shrugged. “Hey, we both got out. And Camilla is really nice, so I think things worked out for everyone.”

“I take it you don’t want to go back to the Demon Realm?” Hunter guessed. Vee shook her head.

“I wouldn’t either,” Hunter looked at the floor, “But here.” He took out an Oracle gem he had taken from the Night Market before coming here. He had it just in case, since he didn’t want to be using Flapjack or his Golden Staff while in the Human Realm. “It’s an Oracle gem. A minor source of magic.”

“Hey, thanks! Luz brings me snacks sometimes, but Oracle gems are *really* good.”

Hunter smiled. Then, he blinked, realizing Luz was staring at the both of them with sparkling wide eyes.

“What are you looking at?” Hunter raised an eyebrow.

“I’m so happy you guys are getting along,” Luz said simply. Hunter and Vee both smiled sheepishly.

“Kids! Dinner!” Camilla called from the next room, making them all jump.

Hunter was officially in love with the human realm. True to Luz’s word, the chicken dish wasn’t a textural nightmare for him. And good lord. It was *good*. Hunter could not believe human food had such deep flavors- he didn’t even think the *Boiling Isles* did.

Camilla was also kind, and attentive, and listened to when Hunter talked about the Isles and magic with passion.

“I don’t think I’m ready to see it myself,” she had laughed sheepishly, “But one day, I’ll see this magic for myself. Everyone I’ve met from the Isles so far has been very kind. Including you, Hunter. I’m glad Luz is friends with you.”

“Ah,” Hunter felt his face heat, still incredibly unused to receiving any compliments. “I’m glad Luz and I are friends too, Mrs. Noceda.”

“Although Eda still makes me a bit nervous,” Camilla sighed. “I made the mistake of getting into a car with her once.”

“Wow, Mom,” Luz laughed, “I have no idea why you’d do that.”

“Me neither, no offense,” Hunter grinned a bit, “Eda is crazy enough without human technology involved.”

Dinner continued on like that. Everyone conversed as they ate, discussing the Human Realm and the Demon Realm, the differences and similarities between. And Hunter found he was close to his answer. Camilla... she was just such a kindhearted woman. Whatever few missteps she made during conversation, it was clear that at her core, she wanted what was best for her daughter, and she would do so as gently as possible.

What really struck Hunter was after dinner, when Hunter expressed this sentiment to Luz. And Luz replied with-

“It wasn’t always perfect. A while back, I got in contact with her while still in the Demon Realm, and... she made me promise to never go back once I left.”

Hunter’s jaw dropped. “That doesn’t seem like her now at all! I mean, she adopted a *Basilisk*. And she let me into her house. I was one of the most dangerous people on the Isles!”

Luz laughed. “Yeah, yeah, you were very tough. But... actually, things were rough for a while. The reason I came to the Boiling Isles in the first place was because she was going to send me to... basically, a summer camp to make me more ‘normal.’”

Hunter stared at Luz. “But you still-”

“Yes, Hunter,” Luz rolled her eyes. “I still love her. I meant it. Because, here’s the thing. I was really upset about it for a long time, thinking my Mom didn’t love me for me.. But the more I thought about it... it wasn’t that she didn’t love my... weirdness. She *adores* how

strange I am. But she was right about one thing- *strangeness* in the human realm is not always appreciated. And sometimes being creative keeps you from going places in life... or it leads to, well. People hurting you. Belos was human, remember- and his attitude towards 'wild witches' is a pretty good example of how... sometimes, being out of a box is treated with cruelty here. She loved me so much that she didn't want to see me hurt."

Hunter processed this, then nodded slowly. "But she clearly came around. Why?"

"I'd ask her," Luz reached out, poking his face, "I don't know everything my mom thinks! All I know is she loves me no matter what. And she eventually got used to the idea that I'm not going to change."

Hunter considered this, then nodded.

"Now," Luz clapped her hands, "No more serious talk. It is time to watch the greatest films of all time- *High School Musical*."

It was two in the morning. The Noceda house was quiet. And Hunter, for the life of him, couldn't sleep.

He had been set up on the couch- much more comfortable than he would've thought- and he was lying awake across it, bathed in the dim light of the moon. The only thing that broke the silence was the distant sound of Luz snoring, and the hum of the refrigerator.

Hunter sighed. He couldn't stop thinking about what Luz had said about her mom. He didn't know why he didn't consider that maybe, even good parental love was complicated, and messy. And it made him think of Darius- and maybe, he was understanding why Darius didn't kick him out, and stop caring about him. him.

Because it was complicated, and messy, when raising a kid with trauma. And that was it, wasn't it? Darius was raising him. He didn't just love him more than his own family did- in

everything but blood, Darius *was* his family now.

He sat up, breathing deeply. It was.. Such an obvious realization, in hindsight. Darius loved him like a father did. And Hunter thought of Darius as his dad.

In the morning, that's what he would go home to.

But there was just one more thing that was bothering him- why had Camilla changed her mind about the Demon Realm?

He got his answer in the form of the very woman creeping down the hall, careful not to wake up. Upon realizing he was already awake, she stood up straight.

"Hunter," she said gently, "It's very late. Are you going to sleep?"

He shook his head. "Not yet. There's... something bothering me. Can... Can I ask you about it, Mrs. Noceda?"

She blinked in surprise, then smiled. "Call me Camilla. And yes, just let me get a glass of water."

She had grabbed water for both of them, and now, they both sat on the couch.

"Ask me anything, Hunter," she opened.

Hunter took a minute, steeled his nerves, and asked directly: "Why did you change your mind? About Luz and the Demon Realm?"

Camilla blinked, surprised. "Ah, it is... a long answer, to that one. But I don't think you would have asked if you didn't want a long answer. Put shortly, I love her."

Hunter nodded. "That much is obvious."

"Good," Camilla leaned back. "Then, here is the long answer. My husband died in a fire," she began. "He was a firefighter. And he was good at it- but against a force of nature, good only lasts for so long. Luz was very young, but it affected her, and I began to worry. I began to worry her love of the strange would put her in danger. And so, I tried to steer her in the same direction as other kids, hoping she'd... I don't know. Settle down. Grow up. Stay safe."

Hunter frowned at this.

"But," She held up a finger, "That isn't how growing up works. I realized that a bit too late. One day, after sending Luz to summer camp as a desperate bid to try and make her more normal, she got in contact with me using... magic I still can't wrap my head around. Something about blood...? Regardless, she told me that the Luz in my house was not her, but was in fact a demon. And that she was from the Demon Realm. Oh, Hunter, I was terrified. This was- the exact kind of danger I was hoping to keep her safe from, and she had... walked into it, right on purpose. And that danger was now in my house. Even when I realized Vee was sweet, and innocent, and really just a kid... well, she told me about the Demon Realm, or her experience of it. She started with the bad parts. It just made me more scared for my daughter. I had made her promise to never return once she had found a way home."

Camilla sighed. "But then I... heard more about it. How the wind rustles through the leaves, how a being gave his life for the people. How witches cared for one another even as the world got cruel. And I thought... for all the scary things Vee had described, of magic and brimstone, there was a beauty to it. And it was then I realized- I had begun to see the Demon Realm the same way Luz did. A place that, for all its terrors... was kind. Just like the Human Realm. And just like Luz. I realized something, that day. Parenting is not about- keeping your kid safe from the world. It is not about that at all! No, it is helping them find *their* brand of danger, teaching them how to be clever enough to conquer it... and loving that uncertainty. Because that uncertainty is them. And it's a beautiful thing, every day. See, Hunter, I changed my mind because I loved Luz how she was. And I was going to have to live with the fact that she was always going to be at risk."

"It must be a horror," Hunter murmured.

“It doesn’t have to be,” Camilla said simply, “More often, it’s just... warm. And proud. Like sunlight.”

And Hunter finally *got it*.

--

Darius jumped as he heard the front door open. He had nearly dozed off at the kitchen table, having gotten little sleep.

Today was the day. It had to be- after everything, Darius needed to ask Hunter, needed to sign the papers and make it official.

“I’m home,” Hunter called, then stepped into the kitchen. “... Hey.”

“Hello, little prince,” Darius greeted with a smile. “Are you ready to talk, or do you want to wait?”

“No,” Hunter shook his head. “I want to talk now.”

Darius breathed in deeply, and let it out after a moment. “Okay. Sit down. You can start, if you’d like.”

Hunter nodded, doing as Darius asked. He hesitated a moment. “It’s... I said most of it, already, back in the infirmary, but...”

He closed his eyes for a second, then opened them. “I got my answer, in the human realm. Of- of why you kept me around. And I think- I’m not sure, but I think I get it. So I just want to say- thank you. For... caring about me. I know you didn’t always- which is why it means so much that you do now, when I’m... myself. And I know. I know I can be difficult, but... you’ve stuck by me. And helped me so much. I don’t know if I would still be here if you hadn’t taken me in. And I still- feel bad about using so much of your time, but... now I get

that you don't really mind, do you? So maybe what I really feel... is that I want to make you proud. And I will. You're... like a father to me, Darius."

He ducked his head as he finished. Vulnerability was still hard for Hunter- which made the words all the more meaningful.

You're like a father to me, Darius.

Darius smiled. "Hunter," he began. "First of all, you're right. I don't mind. Sometimes, I don't always understand you right away, but you're not as lost to the world as you often think you are. And I meant what I said in the infirmary- you're a good kid. I'm already proud of you. Second," he took a deep breath. "I can't always help you with everything. I think, perhaps, it would be a good idea to get you started in therapy."

"Therapy?" Hunter blinked. "But- that's expensive, and-"

"I'm literally rich, Hunter," Darius laughed, "Did you forget? I have more than enough resources to help you feel better, and start actually living. I can't do it all myself- sometimes, it helps to go to a professional. And if you don't like the first therapist, or the next... we'll keep looking for a fit, and a way to help you."

"... Thank you," Hunter whispered. "You- don't have to do that."

"I'd argue I do," Darius rebutted, then softened, hesitating. "There's... one more thing?"

"Yeah?"

Darius suddenly felt overwhelmingly nervous. "Now- listen. As far as I'm concerned- this became... official when we put your bird on the mantle. But the government still exists, and, well, it's not *official* official. But, I *definitely* see you as a son, and I just- I figured maybe, maybe, it would be best, if we did this the right way?"

Darius, with little fanfare, produced the adoption papers from his coat.

“Call it an extra layer of protection from Belos, call it a way to make things easier. I’ll call it what it is. I want to adopt you, Hunter. With your permission.”

Hunter stared at him, eyes wide. And to Darius’s relief, slowly a grin spread across his face.

“You want to adopt me,” he echoed. “For real?”

“Yes,” Darius laughed awkwardly. “For real.”

Hunter got up, and hugged him. Like many times before, he cried a bit into Darius’s shoulder, but two things were different this time-

One, Darius cried too.

And two...

For once, it was tears of happiness.

That night, after the papers had been signed, and celebrations were had, as they fell asleep on the couch while watching the Crystal Ball play reruns of bad movies...

Some would say a wind passed through the living room. Those who knew better would call it what it was- a blessing from the remembered.

As the Vainglory-Clawthornes drifted into a land of sleep, Lucius watched over them, and they dreamed of nothing all night.

The Vainglory-Clawthorne's. Hunter, Lucius, and Darius all stand together. Where Darius and Hunter are lined in black and are alive, Lucius is lined in red and is a ghost.

Chapter End Notes

and there you have it, folks!

i'm really proud of this series. I've never written something so long so fast, and have it get so much positive attention. you guys really are awesome- its your comments that made this possible, as the knowledge you guys loved what i was putting out really helped.

that said, while this is the end of the two main fics in this series... i do have a few more one shot ideas planned. one will be idk, some fun slice of life fluff, and the other is going to be a one shot of Lucius and Darius before Lucius died. thats right, guys.
LUCIUS POV IS COMING.

(its doin what?!)

special thanks to my friend @justsummr, whose awesome DSMP works kind of inspired this series, and my friend Hazel @jackalcpe for being the best beta reader and hype man of all fucking time!!!

and special thanks to you guys for being my comfort during long ass boring as fuck morning shifts.

See ya around! :)

End Notes

socials are as follows! follow me for art for this series as well as updates on new chapters and stuff. and lots of shitposting.

twitter: @faemorrigan_

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ur moms: house

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